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Sketchy Traditions: Argentinian Sketch Comedy
from Popular Theater to Television

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This dissertation describes the 130-year history of sketch comedy in Argentina, from its beginnings in popular theater to its passage to radio and eventually to television, as well as a few of its cinematic manifestations. Sketch, with its short, open-ended format and its combination of dialogism, exaggeration, improvisation, parody, bawdy bodily humor, and absurdity, has often provided an ideal vehicle for comical sociopolitical commentary. For this reason, it has held special audience appeal in Argentina, where widespread questioning of hegemonic discourse has arisen in response to repeated bouts of authoritarian government coupled with economic decline. My examination of Argentinian sketch combines close readings of written, spoken, and audiovisual texts with analysis of their historical and industrial contexts. I use Bergson's principle of the laughable as "mechanical" to show how sketch creates improvisational spaces around Diana Taylor's "cultural repertoires" and Pierre Bourdieu's "*habitus*." This critical dusting-off of an often academically disregarded form of popular cultural production reveals the evolution of a *sketchy tradition* that has often appeared disreputable or even dangerous to those who would uphold the status quo. Ultimately, sketch's ability to provoke a certain *dépaysement* may prove of special interest at a time which finds us, as

Paul Gilroy argues, in need of moving beyond the supposedly homogeneous categories imposed by globalist neo-imperialism as well as fundamentalist localism.

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Introduction: Argentinian Sketch Comedy and the Cultivation of Estrangement

"Se han hecho muchos estudios en distintos gabinetes universitarios para ver cómo reacciona la gente frente a la exposición de Mochila. Hemos tomado voluntarios y admiradores de Mochila, que mirando sus videos y sus presentaciones parecen perder reacción frente a estímulos externos; es decir, parecen entrar en un estado de suspensión de la realidad externa."

—Abel Raztembajer, from the sketch "Fito Mochila"

The 2011 sketch "Fito Mochila," from *Peter Capusotto y sus videos: un programa de rock* (2006-present), deploys three characters, all played by the comedian Diego Capusotto: Fito Mochila himself, a fictional comedian who represents the worst, most inane sort of televisual programming; pipe-smoking, Marxist-bearded Abel Raztembajer, the mass-media scholar whose focus on Mochila's work as representative of TV in general allows him to assert the bovine nature of "las masas"—and by implication, his own more enlightened or distinguished presence; and a Fito Mochila fan, the victim of Raztembajer's supposedly scientific experiments, who remains nameless and faceless,[1] the better to support Raztembajer's description of him as intellectual nonentity. Amongst the three of them, they represent an all-too-frequent interaction between popular or mass culture and the intellectuals who study it.

By lampooning particular *habitussen*, parts of which we inevitably find within ourselves, Capusotto's kind of comicalness encourages audiences to disengage from outmoded behaviors and adapt to changing sociopolitical circumstances. Thus,

[1] The *rolinga* hairstyle worn by this character nonetheless is a characteristically Capusottian marker identifying him as a denizen of one of Buenos Aires' impoverished *villas de emergencia*.

Raztembajer as stereotypical intellectual, in this clip offering an analysis of a televisual comedian—the also fictional Fito Mochila—and of this comedian's audience, gives me a good negative starting point from which to elaborate my project's thematic and theoretical foci. In many ways, the present study may be described as an attempt to avoid Raztembajer's hackneyed, supposedly intellectual approach to mass media as monolithic purveyor of Marcusian happy consciousness, and his tendency to interpret humor exclusively as cultural expression of the lower body politic.

Thus, I have chosen to consider for this project a cultural practice that, while often attracting massive audiences in Argentina, can hardly be described as escapist, and which extends its critique as well as its appeal toward many different social classes and walks of life. Despite its obvious levity, sketch comedy, like the Fito Mochila sketch itself, often engages deeply with sociopolitical reality, promoting popular introspection to move beyond the impasses of repetitive habitus and repertoire—in this case, beyond the image of the intellectual (Raztembajer) and the mass-media audience (his test subjects) as entirely distinct social actors. While this sketch intimates that the intellectual may be just as oblivious as his test subjects, the similarities between them may have a more positive dimension as well. In fact, examination of the history of sketch comedy suggests that the Argentinian *masses* have often shown a capacity for adopting the social scientist's careful, reflective appraisal of cultural practice. While short-form comedy no doubt serves as a vehicle for asserting and defending particularly Argentinian customs and characteristics, at the same time it is a dynamic art form that uses humor to encourage critical engagement with these same traits, thereby encouraging their continued evolution.

As such, the whole history of Argentinian short-form humor, spanning 130 years and at least four different media, deserves, but has never yet received, methodical analysis. My project, which combines close readings of a succession of sketchy texts in conjunction with interpretation of their sociopolitical and industrial contexts, represents a first attempt at filling this critical gap which is symbolized by Raztembajer's ahistorical and generalizing perspective. Thus, to further explain my choice of focus as well as my theoretical interpretation of the matter at hand, it behooves me to elaborate upon how they differ from those evidenced by Capusotto's caricature of the academician.

First, then, we should consider the objects of Raztembajer's nominally intellectual gaze:[2] Fito Mochila, the harebrained farceur with a repertoire based upon obviously pre-coordinated practical jokes like using a string to extract someone's hotdog from the bun just before it is consumed and obnoxiously banal physical gags such as inflating and deflating himself with a bicycle pump; and Mochila's multitudinous audience, to whom Raztembajer refers as "las masas." The comedian sells himself forthrightly as a deliverer of happy consciousness. His hit song, "Piqui piqüi," describes Mochila's method for overcoming despair caused by the consideration of tragic world events such as famine and war. The solution consists simply if circularly of singing over and over the nonsensical words "piqui piqüi," which the wag proceeds to do while dancing and gesturing grotesquely in front of a frenetically flashing kaleidoscopic background.

Meanwhile, "the masses" mirror Mochila's vacuity through a total hypnotic absorption in his antics. Always playing the part of the objective scientist, Raztembajer

[2] An initial voice-over introduces Raztembajer as "vocero del grupo de intelectuales 'Carpa Abierta.'"

proves the completeness of this fascination with an experiment in which volunteers are invited to watch Mochila as researchers subject them to a succession of mistreatments, whacking them on the back, the head, and finally breaking flower pots and logs over their heads, all without causing any disengagement from the television or any letup in the flow of foolish guffaws. Raztembajer sums up his findings with characteristically solemn verbosity: "Parecen perder reacción frente a estímulos externos. Es decir, parecen entrar en un estado de suspensión de la realidad externa." Thus, it would seem, the "Fito Mochila" sketch describes an asinine, tripartite symbiosis between the entertainer, the audience, and the intellectual whose *partially* disapproving attitude allows him to distinguish himself from the other two even as he eggs on the continuation of the whole phenomenon by repeated calls for more "debate."

My first, thematic break from this sort of inane daisy chain thus consists of choosing as my subject a kind of production that does not confirm all critical theory's worst fears (and parenthetical desires) regarding the so-called culture industry. It may be that this shift of critical gaze incurs the danger of blurring or perhaps losing altogether the marks of cultural distinction separating supposedly intellectual reflection from that of "the masses." After all, such a choice involves a certain commingling with these same masses in optimistic veneration of a cultural practice whose dissemination has long depended upon media vilified or ignored by the lettered classes.[3] Perhaps especially in

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[3] As late as 2007, for example, Carolina González Velasco would write of Argentinian *género chico* of the 1920s that "aún es fuerte el prejuicio de que en este amplio corpus 'todas las obras son iguales', o que estas piezas 'no ofrecen nada particular para analizar'" (7). Such an attitude has also been applied to television, in many ways *género chico's* electronic progeny (see, for example, Beatriz Sarlo's 1994 book, which I discuss at length in my fourth chapter).

Latin America, the small screen continues to serve as chief mediatic whipping-boy for social critics looking to explain the perpetually deferred advent of revolutionary consciousness amongst the proletariat.[4] Even within these media, despite sketch humor's often striking engagement with sociopolitical reality, it has often gone especially overlooked, perhaps because of a generalized critical obsession with the validating powers of solemnity. Such is the pervasiveness of this effective symbolic violence that even the producers of this kind of comedy have often perceived their own work as insignificant.[5]

Nevertheless, I have some hope that my focus on Argentinian sketch comedy will in fact deliver me, not only from the cycle of mass deception described by the relationship between Fito Mochila and his audience, but also from the sort of veiled mimicry practiced by Abel Raztembajer. After all, Raztembajer's *translation* of Mochila's "mediating"[6] effect surely betrays the intellectual's covetousness of the performer's singular role as intermediary between power and its subjects. My hope rests, I say, on this cultural practice, epitomized by the Diego Capusotto piece described above, which uses dialogism, exaggeration, improvisation, parody, bawdy, bodily humor, and absurdity to encourage audiences from all walks of life to disengage from the lockstep of

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[4] For a recent example, see Lautaro Matías Rodríguez Taibo's article, "Manipulación emocional televisiva como instrumento para someter a los pueblos latinoamericanos" (2013). Rodríguez Taibo makes some excellent arguments regarding the deficiencies of news shows before falling into the unfortunate and all too common assumption that his observations regarding this particular sort of programming may be extrapolated to television as a whole. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, commits a nearly identical overgeneralization in his 1996 book, *Sur la télévision*.

[5] See, for example, early sketch-writer Antonio Prat's description of his work as "la espuma de la cerveza" (Prestigiacomo 1995). Other comedians, such as Pepe Biondi and Alberto Olmedo, often lamented not having dedicated themselves to more "serious" work.

[6] I employ the sense of this word given it by Jesús Martín-Barbero in his seminal work *De los medios a las mediaciones: cultura, comunicación, y hegemonía* (1987), where it refers to the situation of communication technologies between hegemonic powers and popular desires and imaginaries.

habitus and repertoire, reclaiming the body and psyche from the disciplining discourses that seek to contain them, thus potentially finding new modalities of interaction that could be both individually and collectively beneficial.

This least complacent of comic practices shows how the sources of society's ills lie not merely in the perversions of the most powerful, but also in the structural and symbolic violences that erect the social framework through which power is legitimized. Raztembajer's mistreatment of the faceless Fito Mochila fan, for example, and the latter's passive acceptance of this abuse, drive home a fundamental message regarding the (mis)use of scholarly knowledge for the maintenance of classism and ethnocentrism. This sketch contains the implicit message that real learning will happen only when the academic and the proletarian step outside the discourses that contain and separate them, the better to connect and communicate on a fundamentally human level.

It may be that the sort of *dépaysement* supplied by sketch comedy might also provide a kind of antidote to certain more generalized ills of our time. As Paul Gilroy argues in his 2006 book, *Postcolonial Melancholia,* current times find us at an impasse between globalist neo-imperialism and localist essentialism, which both tend to reinforce the idea of supposedly homogenous categories such as race, ethnicity, and nationality. To surmount this deadlock, he suggests, we should reconsider the virtues—not just for the intellectual, but also for the "everyday Joe"—of "estrangement from one's own culture and history" (140) in order to "go beyond the issue of tolerance into a more active engagement with the irreducible value of diversity *within* sameness" (139, italics mine). Comedy as cultural practice that rewards intellectuals and everyday Joes alike—if there's

any difference between the two—with laughter, may provide a particularly attractive pathway toward the cultivation of this sort of consciousness.

Of course, comedy takes many forms, and may just as easily be used to reinforce *habitus* and repertoire as to encourage our wriggling free from them. As indicated by Fito Mochila's numbing antics, mere transgressive behavior may in fact serve as a vehicle for happy consciousness. Supporting this observation, Achille Mbembe argues in *On the Postcolony* (2001)[7] that *commandement* has ways of infiltrating and appropriating even the most outrageous of Bakhtinian grotesquerie.[8] However, sketch comedy's simple form—brief, two to 15-minute comical pieces, generally employing a relatively small number of actors, and using absurdity, exaggeration, and parody to deploy political or sociopolitical satire—lends it a flexibility that often allows it to *also* wriggle free from the temptation or obligation to serve as a mouthpiece for hegemonic discourse.

While not going so far as to elaborate a determinism of genre, I do suggest that different comedic forms have historically *tended* to lend themselves to certain specific sociopolitical and aesthetic purposes. Short-form performance humor lasts longer than a joke and may thus apply itself to the detailed portrayal of distinct, often exaggeratedly stereotyped characters personifying certain genders, social classes, or ethnicities. By satirizing the impasses of their interaction, it points out the machine-like quality of these *types*, encouraging the development of more fluid forms of sociability. However, its

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7 Here I refer specifically to Mbembe's development of the idea of *commandement* in the chapter titled "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity" (102-141).

8 Thus I interpret, for example, the 2011 film *Bridesmaids,* which despite deploying an admirably feminine obscenity, eventually only uses this groundbreaking salacity to set up the inevitable wedding scene at the end. Finally, it is just another romantic comedy validating the bourgeois social contract.

brevity in comparison to a movie or a sitcom means it often lacks the capacity for development that is required for the ultimate imposition of morals or representation of resolution as a return to *normalcy* (whether this might consist of old-fashioned patriarchy, racism, and classism, or the unending injunctions to *tolerate* which Gilroy identifies as the bane of our own times). Instead of treating audiences like children who must be taught a lesson, sketch tends to satisfy itself with the portrayal of sociopolitical issues and their attendant conflicts, leaving resolution—if there is one to be had—up to the viewers themselves. Further encouraging this anarchic spirit is the shoestring budget often accorded to sketch, which can be executed with just one or two maverick performers who often write their own material.

Sketch comedy as cultural practice of course exists in many parts of the world. However, in the Argentina of the last 130 years it has flourished with an uncommon vibrancy. The reasons for this vigor underline the general sociopolitical bent of this comic form. Meanwhile, a description of these reasons also shows why analyses of recent Argentinian political and cultural history, including the history of the country's sketch comedy, may prove of special interest given recent global developments. The beginning decades (1890-1930) of the period examined by this dissertation coincided with a certain Argentinian affluence, as growth in the country's agricultural sector, fueled by foreign immigration and investment, made for a per capita income sometimes "greater than [those of] France, Germany, Spain, and Italy" (Blustein 444). However, the economic opportunity for many new immigrants did not generally translate into political power, as the old landed oligarchies remained in control.

While the depression of the 1930s did not hit Argentina as hard as some other countries, its effects were enough to convince the wealthy that they could no longer afford to maintain the simulacrum of democracy that had been developed under the guidance of activist and two-time president Hipólito Yrigoyen. This period (1930-1943), known to many das *La Década Infame,* began with the first of the century's various military coups. While the subsequent series of leaders did much to develop industry, thereby setting off a great rural-to-urban migration, they effectively sold the country off to foreign interests in exchange for the continued affluence of local elites, notably the rural oligarchy (Rock 213-248). Then, Juan Domingo Perón's government (1946-1955) began with a period of populist redistribution that would make him an important figure even to this day in Argentinian politics, only to end up favoring big capital once again.[9]

Thus, the next military takeover initially received considerable popular support, which would quickly be withdrawn when it became apparent that the new leaders' crackdown on labor would only intensify the one begun during Perón's second term. The next two decades were spent between outright military dictatorship (1955-1958 and 1966-1973) and nominal democracy, with Peronists banned from participation in elections. Perón's brief return from exile and third presidency (1973-1974) was marred by clashes between leftist and rightist supporters.[10] This conflict was definitively decided in favor of the latter group after Perón's death, during the ineffective reign of his third

[9] In part, it should be acknowledged, this was a necessary evil required for maintaining the international competitiveness of local industry.
[10] Argentina continues to be a country of immigrants, though these days instead of coming from Europe they tend to come from other South American countries (Bolivia, Paraguay, Perú), as well as from Africa and Asia.

wife Isabel (1974-1976) and the subsequent dictatorship (1976-1983), by far the bloodiest and most repressive yet.

This combination of immigration, popular disenfranchisement alternating with outright authoritarianism, and economic and political instability, now sounds increasingly familiar even within the historical centers of world capitalism. In Argentina, it favored the development of a comic tradition that could keep pace with fast-changing and unstable sociopolitical reality. Meanwhile, sketch's emphasis on improvisational flexibility and self-reflexivity encouraged audiences to adopt for their own these qualities which may have proven important not only for the meeting of economic and social needs, but even in some cases for day-to-day survival, as well as for collectively seeking to resolve frequent social impasses. And in fact, the period discussed by this dissertation has included significant progress toward the overcoming of many of these impasses.

Granted, Argentina's history of the last century has occasionally been marred by the excesses of a certain internal fractiousness.[11] However, this same anarchic, tumultuous spirit has also no doubt played a significant role in keeping the country from the commission of much greater atrocities abroad and in favoring self-determination in both international and domestic arenas. Argentina's international history in this sense goes back at least to president Juan D. Perón's (1946-1955) Tercera Vía, continuing with Argentinian membership (1971-1990) in the Non-Aligned Movement, and into the 21st century with the country's resistance to the threats to national sovereignty posed by vulture fund investors. Meanwhile, in addition to maintaining free elections despite

[11] One no doubt encouraged by certain external interests who benefitted in one way or another from this instability.

continued economic woes, since 1983 the country has made significant human rights advances, especially in the areas of gender and sexual equality, with Argentina often surpassing the United States in these regards ("Argentine Senate Backs Bill"; Lavers; "The World Bank Gender Data Portal"). These accomplishments, which have been made without the country's ever having regained its prosperity of the early 1900s, attest to the innovativeness and resiliency of the Argentinian populace, and to its willingness to engage in intensive auto-analysis followed up by political action. Meanwhile, sketch comedy, I submit, may have been one of various factors stimulating such advances, as this comic format can be an effective means of inducing communal self-awareness and encouraging development of positive sociability.

From its beginnings, sketch comedy enjoyed great success in Argentina, where in the first decades of the 20th century it was already attracting massive audiences as part of a sort of popular theatre production, known as *teatro de revista,* whose mixture of song, dance, monologue, and short-form comedy mark it as the clear forerunner of today's televised sketch programs. These works already evidenced a high degree of comic sophistication, showing a meta-performative awareness of the sociopolitical role played by theater, including *revista* itself. As such, *revista* formed an important part of the system of popular theater founded by the Podestá family, initially of *circo criollo* fame, translating the latter genre's carnivalesque atmosphere into a more urban setting. Still during *teatro de revista's* heyday, the 1920s saw the beginnings of sketch's adaptation to radio, where it also maintained an important presence despite the limitations of this

medium in terms of communicating physical humor, generally an important part of short-form comedy.

Then, just as the popular draw of theatre began to decline in the 1950s, the television arrived, and with it a slew of programs whose very titles—e.g., *Revistas 1952* (1952), *Las grandes revistas de los sábados* (1955), *La revista de los viernes* (1959), *La revista dislocada* (1959)—trace the translation of popular theatre and sketch to the small screen. While in the US the more complacent and predictable sitcom dominated the television of the 1960s and 1970s, Argentinian audiences continued to show marked preference for sketch. Though the heavily bowdlerized early small screen produced a significantly watered-down version of this format in comparison to its former theatrical manifestations, it was still much more edgy than the bourgeois-oriented sitcom.

Partly due to mismanagement of what had become an exclusively state-run enterprise, and partly as intentional sabotage of what was perceived as a potential vehicle of dissent, the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) virtually dismantled the television industry (Mazziotti 86). Amidst the resultant great influx of foreign programming, sketch momentarily lost its hold on the ratings, only to recover it in part with Marcello Tinelli's *Videomatch* (1989-2004), which included an adulterated version of this comic format as part of its omnibus content. Meanwhile other more vanguardist artists honed televised sketch to a fine-tuned expression of popular critical thought. In the process, they turned this critical scrutiny upon the small screen itself, thereby signaling a televisual coming-of-age as well as returning short-form humor to its meta-performative roots.

My first fitful sidestep, then, of the Raztembajerish repertoire, consists of choosing as the object of my study a popular cultural practice that encourages development of self-reflexivity rather than the numbing repetition of hackneyed habitussen. Secondly, we must also squirm free of Raztembajer's theoretical approach to humor, which he allows to languish in a Bakhtinian indeterminacy, and which is encapsulated by the following statement:

Después de mucho debate podemos afirmar que Mochila funciona como catarsis de conductas reprimidas; es decir que se deposita en todo aquello que en el devenir del comportamiento social entra en el plano de lo no permitido. Si es una actitud sana o enferma sigue de todas maneras para nosotros siendo materia de discusión.

To a certain extent, I cannot help feeling that my choice of subject will aid my theoretical endeavors as well. As Roberto Fernández Retamar has famously written, "Una teoría de la literatura es la teoría de *una literatura*" (82, italics his). It seems to follow that a humor theory applicable to Fito Mochila and his ilk would very likely have little to do with sketch comedy.

Likewise, the apparent lack of sketch-centric theory can be explained quite simply by the fact that short-form performance humor has been so little studied.[12] Meanwhile, generalist works on humor like Andrew Stott's *Comedy* (2004) seem heavily influenced by the movies and sitcom, with statements such as the following that sound unduly universalizing to a sketch enthusiast: "Comedy concludes with a standardized happy

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[12] In a similar vein, Freud notes in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* "It is striking with what a small number of instances of jokes recognized as such the authorities are satisfied for the purposes of their enquiries, and how each of them takes the same ones over from his predecessors" (12).

ending, a conscious superimposition of a formal pattern on material that may until the very last moment whirl with turbulence" (164). Likewise, his take on women in comedy makes little sense to a student of sketch: "In the twentieth century, the convention of marriage continued to impose limits on the ability of women to determine their own affairs in comedy" (93). In Argentinian sketch, as we will see, marriage has rarely been portrayed; to the contrary, from the very beginnings of the 20th century this comic format has foregrounded many unmarried women who unapologetically form part of the workforce, are outspoken, assertive, and expressive of feminine desire. To some extent such critical invisibility makes sense in a country like the United States, where this kind of comedy has so often been relegated to late-night status.[13] However, strangely enough, this lack of critical attention has been repeated in Argentina, where as a popular phenomenon it would seem that sketch should be much harder to ignore.

Since the beginning of the current decade, a handful of Argentinian scholars have begun to publish short pieces on the history of comedy on television. Amongst them, Mercedes Moglia (2009, 2012, and 2013) stands out as having written several insightful articles on the evolution of televised comedy. Damián Fraticelli (2012) has also written an article focused on establishing a periodization of small-screen comic production. These authors, apparently like myself also initially inspired by the work of Diego Capusotto, have taken the first steps toward identifying the comedy of the last two decades as a phenomenon building upon a longer tradition of popular cultural expression.

[13] Another, non-US example of this state of disregard would be Eli Rozik's *Comedy: A Critical Introduction* (2011), whose extremely brief (1.5 pages) section on sketch separates it from "comedy proper" and asserts that short-form's humor is only "occasionally used in the spirit of satire" (127-128).

However, these articles concern themselves almost exclusively with television. They provide little commentary regarding televised sketch's relationship with its larger sociopolitical context or with the fifty-plus years of sketchy cultural production preceding the advent of the small screen. Also, importantly, they do not speculate as to why this *particular* format—sketch—has been so prevalent in Argentina.

While works treating popular Latin American humor in general have been few and far between, funny movies have at least received some attention. One recent example, *Humor in Latin American Cinema* (2016), again shows how a cine-centric focus can prove incompatible with theoretical musings on humor in general. In his provocative introduction to this volume, Juan Poblete identifies "two main Western traditions of [criticism regarding the] comic and comedy" (4). One of these, the "superiority" or "satire" theory, holds that audiences laugh at the "butt" of a joke who behaves in a way perceived as uncivilized and unsophisticated, with the comedy thus aimed at shaming the transgressor into normalization. The other, which he terms "populist," champions the "liberated underdog" who rebels against hegemonic "ideologies and values," thus offering a vision of a *different* normalcy that would somehow be better than the dominant one. The problem with both these theories, Poblete says, is that they "share unstated assumptions about social value as measured by norm" (5). He then suggests that there is a third, "best" sort of humor, that neither imposes norms nor "offers alternatives" (5) to them. However, as concrete example of such comedy, he only offers up certain texts from the Middle Ages "having the *fou* or fool as a protagonist" (5). Nor does he explain why, exactly, this might be the *best* sort of humor.

Again, I suggest that format could play a crucial role here, and that Poblete may have difficulty identifying modern examples of such humor precisely because comedy's sketchier side remains necessarily outside the cine-centric focus of his introduction. The comical desideratum he outlines is plainly at odds with what he describes as the "ur-situation of comedy in Latin America": "a formally uneducated person from the countryside comes to the city, where she has to confront the many new experiences generated by urban, modern life, only to come up victorious at the other end of the trajectory, thanks to her inner moral strength" (20). Such a trajectory tends to confirm, rather than slip free from, both the theoretical traditions that Poblete describes. The protagonist's eventual "victory" supports both the "superiority" theory, insofar as she is *normalized* into bourgeois society (often through marriage to a wealthy man), as well as the "populist" theory, insofar as this normalization implies a certain vindication of ethnically and socioeconomically marked traits. The overall effect is one of validation of the bourgeois social contract—the *norm*—with the implication that there is plenty of wealth to go around, and that the acquisition of fortune and status depends solely on individual virtue.

Sketch, as we will see, describes much different circumstances, ones that Poblete might find much more reconciliable with the sort of humor he seeks to theorize. Sketch foregoes the deployment of rags-to-riches stories so favored by romantic comedies and telenovelas.[14] It sticks much closer to reality by suggesting that class divisions are difficult if not impossible to surmount. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the Capusotto

[14] Nor does it impose a normative upper-middle-classdom, as do many sitcoms.

sketch described in the beginning of this introduction, it typically subjects *all* social classes (as well as ethnicities, genders, age groups, etc.) to ridicule.[15] Inevitably, one ends up laughing, at least partially, at oneself. Thus, sketch seems to aim itself at the ubiquitous cultivation of the sort of self-reflexivity that Baudelaire, in his "De l'essence du rire," describes as reserved for a select few "philosophes": "un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son *moi*" (343, italics his).

However, unlike the situation of Baudelaire's "philosophe," who laughs at his own solitary misfortune, sketch depicts a collective adversity arising from the impasse between disparate *habitussen* and their associated repertoires. And finally, rather than resolve this predicament through the establishment of any sort of *normativeness,* whether top-down or bottom-up, sketch implies that it is the normative *itself*—as represented by the exaggerated types and behaviors on display—which is at the root of the problem. Meanwhile, denouement is perpetually deferred, as in the end of the Fito Mochila sketch, which shows the harebrained entertainer persisting with his ridiculous song and dance as a voice-over grandiloquently foretells the imminent continuation of the "investigación de este fenómeno."

While reluctant to make any claims as to having identified the "best" sort of humor, I suggest that the advantage of sketch lies in its combination of impartial ridicule with its refusal to moralize or offer pat solutions. Finally, it is left up to audiences to use

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[15] That is, we have the *masas*, represented by Raztembajer's "test subject," who wears the distinctive haircut of the *rolinga,* in Capusotto's sketches used to signify the often impoverished denizens of the *villas miserias*; the fabulously wealthy Fito Mochila; and Raztembajer himself, representative of the middle-class intellectual.

as they may this “estrangement from one’s own culture and history,” finding their own ways to identify and engage with the “diversity *within* sameness,” to move beyond the impasses described by the comedians.

My theoretical framework thus owes much to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus,* nicely summed up by Wacquant as “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (316). Also, I have adapted Diana Taylor’s term “repertoire”[16] to refer to the behavior of a given *habitus* within specific social scenarios. Thus, for example, Abel Raztembajer represents the *habitus* of the middle-class intellectual, which contains the repertoire of appropriate behavior by which he may enact the scenario of analysis of popular (or *mass,* as he would no doubt have it) culture.

But how, exactly, does short-form humor encourage us to recognize the galling sameness of repetitive *habitus* and repertoire, the better to identify by contrast and embrace the rich strangeness which lies within ourselves and within others? To explain this effect, I have often made use of Bergson’s concept of “mechanical inelasticity” (4) as frequent characteristic of the laughable. Sketch puts into motion a comical clockwork whose cogwheels correspond to the flame-hardened perceptions, gestures, speech patterns, and other modalities of interaction belonging to specific social types. The laughable arises from our inability to go beyond the (dis)functionality laid out for us by disciplining discourse, and in the recognition of the absurdity of the resultant repeated

[16] From her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003).

social impasses, whose potential for indefinite recurrence is emphasized by these comical pieces' general lack of closure.

However, we may only go so far with Bergson, whose Victorian sensibility, perhaps, led him to identify the material *body* as the inherent site of mechanicalness, rather than the discourses that seek to contain and control it. Bergson describes a somewhat Manichaean vision in which the laughable arises from materiality's obstruction of the gracefulness of the soul, and the goal of comedy in exposing this obstruction is to renew the vitality of the body by "keeping [it] in touch with a living ideal" (11). My own approach turns this analysis on its head, so it is precisely the premeditated *ideal* which causes bodies to behave in a mechanical manner, and comedy's job is to return us to the materiality that we all share and which itself is a kind of mockery of the internalized senses of distinction that obstruct mutually beneficial sociability.

Here, I have obviously borrowed liberally from Bakhtin, especially his comments regarding the "grotesque body," which is "not separated from the rest of the world," and which is "unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (26). At the same time, I avoid a wholesale adoption of the Bakhtinian "carnivalesque," as it seems to me rather too much bound to what Poblete describes as the "populist" theory of humor that would establish an *alternative normalcy* based upon the supposed superiority of "folk" culture. To be sure, especially during the first part of the historical period described by this dissertation, there was a need for bringing visibility to popular cultural attributes that hegemonic, Eurocentric discourse looked to suppress or ignore. However, even during this time, sketch's fulfillment of this need was balanced by its refusal to idealize social

types, no matter how rooted in popular reality. Instead, as always, the suggestion seemed to be rather that to progress Argentinian society would need to move beyond these types. Later, as the progressive *carnivalization* of mass culture allowed for an insidious demagoguery to gain a foothold, sketch had to become even more wary of automatically validating attitudes and behaviors seeming to come from popular social strata.[17]

As Stallybrass and White have shown, ultimately the association of bawdy, bodily humor exclusively with oppressed or disadvantaged groups leads to a theoretical stalemate. While some argue that carnivalesque celebration serves as "catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle" (14), others wonder "whether the 'licensed release' of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes" (13). This theoretical ambivalence is caricatured by the statements of Abel Raztembajer regarding the carnivalesque antics of Fito Mochila. Says Raztembajer, "Es claro que Mochila sintetiza un colectivo de valores y de sentimientos que se hallan en el imaginario de las masas." However, his "experiments" seem to validate the ideas of *escape valve* theorists who would suggest that this "synthesis" only serves to let off steam that the *masas* might otherwise use to effect real social change. Moreover, his final withholding of judgement as to whether the "catarsis" effected by Mochila is "sana" or "enferma" fixes Raztembajer as a middle-class intellectual who doesn't mind extending the "debate" indefinitely. This only allows him to reproduce his own *habitus* and with it the fetish of

[17] See, for example, my comments in Chapter 4 on the talk show.

his own objectivity as well as the desire of replacing Mochila as mediator between power and "the masses."[18]

In any case, one must wonder whether the current prevalence of carnivalesque themes in media readily available to *all* social classes may obviate this debate, returning us instead to the sort of sensibility evidenced by Laurent Joubert's *Treatise on Laughter* (1579). Here, in a text dedicated to the amusement and edification of none other than the young princess Maguerite de Valois, the good physician nonchalantly expands upon such themes as "Whence it Comes that One Pisses, Shits, and Sweats by Dint of Laughing" (60). In other words, while many of comedy's effects and themes invoke what Bakhtin deems the "bodily lower stratum" (78), this need not indicate their *exclusive* relationship with the lower regions of the body politic. For my purposes, sketch's advocacy of a return to the body does not necessarily direct itself at any isolated social group. Rather, in a way very much in line with the main tenets of cultural studies as outlined by Sardar and van Loon, sketch often aims to "expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices…in *all their complex forms*" (7, italics mine). Indeed, this sort of cultural production itself may often be read as a kind of social science with special potential for generating popular empowerment insofar as it makes itself not just accessible, but also *entertaining,* to a wide range of social actors.

Finally, any theoretical approximation to sketch comedy must remain loose enough to allow for the markedly protean quality of this form of cultural production. Because of its high degree of engagement with rapidly-changing sociopolitical reality,

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[18] Raztembajer's having been chosen as commentator for what is supposed to be a televised, documentary-style news story would seem to indicate that this desire is not *entirely* fantastical.

analysis of short-form comedy must never isolate it from its historical context, which it reflects and affects through both formal and thematic innovation. Adding to this variability, we must also consider sketch's cross-media trajectory. Thus, the writing of sketch comedy's history is inherently also a kind of theorizing, opposed to a Raztembajerish synchronic isolation of pop cultural production as ahistorical postmodernist "fenómeno." Sketch itself, after all, is a specific kind of cultural *repertoire*. However, unlike many such repertoires, whose preservation of static tradition, Diana Taylor asserts, may rival or even surpass the fixative potential of the written archive, short-form comedy relies for its survival upon a sketchily "questionable" or even "dangerous" continual repositioning of cultural practice along the borderlines of acceptability.

Diego Capusotto's sketches thus represent one of the latest manifestations of a "sketchy tradition" that has come to assert and defend particularly Argentinian *habitussen* and repertoires even as it uses humor to encourage critical engagement with these same categories, thereby encouraging their continued evolution. The value of such a voice becomes apparent when we consider that this country has often found itself caught between cultural imperialism's threat of erasure of local tradition and the counter-threat of fascistic cultural essentialism. Meanwhile, my description of this cultural practice as "sketchy" does not only refer to the generic qualities of short-form humor. Rather, I avail myself also of the word's informal meanings—"dishonest," even "dangerous."

Firstly, this kind of comedy has sometimes had to cultivate a certain dodginess to survive. While inherently closer to *mockery* than to the *mimicry* described by Homi

Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), sketch nonetheless has made use of the latter technique as well, notably during Argentina's first decades of electronic media, when programming content was so strictly controlled that in order to be aired short-form humor often had to at least give the *appearance* of backing up key tenets of hegemonic discourse, such as the rule of law and order, the desirability of bourgeois attitudes toward money, sex, work, and so on. Later, the inevitable "slippage" (Bhabha 123) of mimicry would allow sketch to return to its more openly satirical roots.

Also, this sort of humor often represents a *danger* to hegemonic interests. It demonstrates and encourages a popular tendency to behave in exactly the opposite fashion from that demonstrated by Raztembajer's predictable test subjects. By promoting reflective recognition over reflexive repetition, it urges audiences to end cycles of symbolic violence. By showcasing improvisation rather than rote memorization, it models strategies for transforming newfound self-awareness into action. It is no accident, probably, that this kind of cultural production has thrived in the South American country where anarchism made its strongest showing of the 20th century (Simon 138). While anarchism as a significant, consolidated political movement was stamped out in the first decades of that century (Oved 21), it no doubt affected the popular imaginary in more permanent ways.

The history of comic performance in Argentina may therefore be of special interest in a global climate combining the continued advance of transnational capitalism with a new rise of authoritarianism. The Argentinian experience of the last century may prove portentous of similar developments arising around the world and analysis of

humorous expression in Argentina may provide insight as to potential methods of coping with or even resisting difficult political and economic circumstances. By focusing on Argentinian comedy as an exemplary model of popular cultural production I also hope to avoid contribution to what Nicolas Shumway calls "an unfortunate genre in Argentine letters: the explanation of failure" (112).

To an extent, Shumway himself ends up contributing to this tradition with his historiographical *The Invention of Argentina* (1991), which asserts that the country's occasionally violent sociopolitical instability may be attributed to its inability to agree on a coherent set of "guiding fictions" such as those that have provided stewardship to the United States: "representative government, melting pot, American way of life" (xi), etc. If Shumway had trouble locating this coherence amongst lettered historical accounts, his difficulties would have multiplied tenfold had he considered the history of sketch comedy in Argentina. This is a cultural practice, after all, that dedicates itself precisely to *freeing* audiences from the grip of such hypocritical, mad, and often lethal delusions.

To illustrate the dynamism of this tradition, which unlike the texts Shumway examines forms part of the country's unofficial history, it will be necessary to combine close readings of a succession of sketchy texts in conjunction with analyses of their sociopolitical contexts. I have divided my account of the history of Argentinian sketch comedy into four chapters. Chapter 1 describes the advent of this form of cultural production in Buenos Aires' network of popular theaters, specifically within a certain kind of production, known as *teatro de revista,* whose mixture of song, dance, monologue, and short-form comedy mark it as the clear forerunner of today's televised

sketch programs. Here I explore the European roots of *teatro de revista* and Argentina's voracious cannibalism of the same, providing close textual analysis of a group of Argentinian *revista* texts with production dates ranging between 1890-1933. In *teatro de revista,* we find a comicalness that, like much of today's sketch comedy, encourages audiences to consider the strangeness of the everyday and to avoid falling into lockstep with prescribed *habitus* and repertoire.

Chapter 2 details the undeniably traumatic passage of sketch from a comparatively anarchic theatre scene to often rigidly-controlled early television (1951-1969). The contents of early televised humor, most iconically represented by the work of Pepe Biondi, were often remarkably diluted in comparison to earlier theatrical versions. However, this format's continuing popularity suggested the survival of a perennial sketchiness in the Argentinian collective consciousness, one that would eventually re-blossom, regaining or in some ways even surpassing its former glories. It may thus be possible to identify in Biondi's televisually colonized sketch a sort of "mimicry" of hegemonic discourse, the "slippage" of which would eventually allow for the return of this comic form back to its popular roots.

Chapter 3 describes the life and times of consummate TV comedian Alberto Olmedo. The last dictatorship's dissolution in 1983 opened the airwaves to a freedom of expression that the country had not experienced since radio's first decade, and Olmedo took advantage of the new atmosphere of liberty by leading forth a renaissance in televised *revista*-style humor. Building upon short-form comedy's sexually-frustrated ur-situation, Olmedo added an earthy pansexuality to his work, at the same time initiating a

metatextuality that would eventually allow small-screen comedy to to become truly televisual instead of merely emulating its theatrical progenitor. However, paradoxically, the period of this format's televisual rebirth was also the time when it began to lose its historical grip on the ratings, as industrial damage caused by neoliberal policies took its toll and national television began to have trouble competing against high-budget foreign production and its Argentinian imitators.

As described in Chapter 4, the 1990s thus found the most innovative national sketch shows engaged in a televisual equivalent of guerrilla warfare against a massive onslaught of alienating and numbing foreign programming and its Argentinian equivalents. Pushed to the periphery, where as Andrew Stott (4) argues comedy had its Western origins, and where as I show theatrical revue-cum-*revista* also first came into being, sketch found a new resourcefulness, using televisual parody to see through the empire's new mediatic clothing. The program *Cha cha cha* (1994-1997) proved especially successful in this regard, with its Pantagruelian lineup of parodies and spot-on historical self-awareness. Meanwhile, *Cha cha cha* would also provide the training ground for a young Diego Capusotto, who would eventually bring Argentinian sketch into this century, beginning to bridge the gap between television and the internet, as well as between popular culture and academia. Partly in homage to a comedian who has played a very important part in awakening critical attention to Argentinian short-form humor, and partly as a way of demonstrating the continuity of this cultural practice, each of my chapters begins by describing a sketch from Diego Capusotto's most recent televisual project, *Peter Capusotto y sus videos* (2006-present).

Chapter 1—Sketch Comedy's *raíces revisteriles*

In the television sketch "Vamos a un parque," excerpted from the 1990s program *Cha cha cha* (1992-1997), comedian Diego Capusotto deploys one of his early characters, the deranged yogi "Siddharta Kiwi." Skipping, slipping, gesturing wildly, dressed only in socks, a makeshift turban, and a sort of loincloth, and alternating threats and imprecations with yogic exhortations to stretch and exercise the body, the comedian urges his audience to burn down the city and bring about the New Age.

In "Vamos a un parque," S. Kiwi recounts a trip to a plaza—one of those public spaces that may remind us of Bakhtin's marketplace. Yet here, instead of the informal, ribald language of the popular classes, he describes only sharply divided special interest groups, each of which attacks the hypothetical pedestrian for not belonging to its clique. A group of women "peinadas como Carlos Gardel," who call him a "maldito machista fálico," is succeeded by a band of skinheads who deem him a "comunista lustracaños;" finally, a herd of tambourine-beating "Testigos de Jaimito" complete the dialectical triad with the insulting synthesis, "eres un hijo de Beelzebub." After a brief purifying ritual—"nos enyoguisamos"—the mystic responds, as I have already indicated, with an incitation of violence: "Qué lindo que la gente la pasa. / Ahora les incendio toda la plaza."

If, as I suspect, the appeal of this clip extends beyond that experienced by an exclusively Argentinian viewership, Capusotto's perhaps unconventionally accessible humor might seem to evidence a significant debt to the processes of globalization. The transculturations allowed for, or imposed, by these processes can cause certain

expressions to have, or at least appear to have, near-universal significance. Thus, Capusotto's yogi, for example, makes use of an Orientalizing code that identifies the "Eastern mystic" as a person of spiritual depth and gravity—a stereotype that Capusotto proceeds to undercut through clumsy, rapid gesturing and seemingly uncharacteristic violence in speech and conduct.

Without entirely dismissing the validity of these observations, we should recognize that their exegetic capacity remains quite superficial. Far from being just a spontaneous expression of the current global sociopolitical climate, Capusotto's ability to produce a performance with such pan-Hispanic or even cross-linguistic appeal in fact builds upon a long tradition of specifically Argentinian cultural practice. Here sketch, in one form or another, has enjoyed over a century of truly massive appeal.

Essentially, "Vamos a un parque" (López, 2007) is a performance about performances. I use the term "performance" in the sense employed by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), where it applies not only to spectacles conceived to be enacted for the benefit of a passive audience, but also to everyday cultural practice, carried out and transmitted from person to person, even from generation to generation, via the embodiment of specific cultural repertoires. Despite their ideological and cosmetic differences, the rabid feminists, skinheads and religious fanatics in "Vamos a un parque" have something in common: they are all enacting an age-old scenario of group identification, that of othering, defining a common enemy. In fact, each group is so focused on playing out this scenario that they fail to *see* the person whom they are attacking; when the feminists single him out, our hypothetical passer-by protests "¡Pero

yo también tengo mi parte femenina!" but instead of ingratiating him with the first group, this outburst only gets him in trouble with the skinheads, who again miss the mark by calling him a communist. This shared scenario also permits each group to express its own particular embodied practices—the women's masculine hair, the skinheads' lack thereof, the *Testigos*' song-and-dance—which identify them to each other and to others, and which have a history of transmission that Taylor would describe as being every bit as durable and influential as any by-laws or holy books in the written archive.

Of course, the spectacle that most interests me here is the performance *about* those performances. It, too, fulfills a general purpose—that of causing laughter—in a quite specific way, one communicating identity and indicating the transmission of embodied cultural practice from generation to generation. However, somewhat paradoxically, this performance does not implicitly reaffirm, but rather explicitly *ridicules* cultural repertoire, as a reflexive repetition of speech and gesture that limits the individual's sociability and obstructs production of new, original meaning. As such, the deeper focus of the sketch seems not to be the codified gesture and speech it imitates (the skinheads, feminists, and so on), but the body itself (Capusotto), with its capacity to mold understanding of its surroundings into expressions of originality and innovation.

Argentina's long tradition of counter-traditional comic performance, with Capusotto's work perhaps representing a moment of culmination, did not begin with television; rather, its lineage reaches back to a certain type of European popular theatre that would find fertile breeding ground in the turbulent Argentinian sociopolitical environment. Far from being just a clever reworking of certain *global* tropes, "Vamos a

un parque" activates a set of elements and themes that, as we will see, have been central to Argentinian comedy for over a hundred years. Despite its postmodern feel, this clip builds upon a tradition in which song, dance, monologue, and sketch have been used to explore, with characteristic skepticism, such themes as public space, sociopolitical affiliation, stereotype, and, importantly, nationality / foreignness.

Again, I find it useful to consider Paul Gilroy's exhortations to practice "estrangement from one's own culture and history" (140) to "go beyond the issue of tolerance into a more active engagement with the irreducible value of diversity *within* sameness" (139, italics mine). With these purposes in mind, study of the history of popular and mass culture in so-called *developing* countries like Argentina, whose lack of imperialist and neocolonialist booty has perhaps made for a generally less contented and less gullible public—more accustomed to questioning any elite national agenda—may prove especially enlightening. In Argentina, as we will see, "critical knowledge of one's own culture and society," which can "only arise from a carefully cultivated degree of estrangement" (Gilroy 145), has spawned comic practices that began attracting massive audiences decades before the French surrealists introduced the idea of *dépaysement* to the European avant-garde.[19]

In addition, as with most artistic practice, it may be hypothesized that *revista* and sketch not only reflect, but also *reproduce* certain cultural—also sometimes counter-

[19]Besides its peripheral location in relation to the centers of world capitalism, the country's demographic profile must have contributed to the attractiveness of these practices. Jason Borge writes that in Buenos Aires "a conflation of *extranjero* and *extraño* [is] constitutive of normative local identity" (262), an idea whose sensibility is attested to by the percentage of foreigners living there—50% in 1890, for example (Prestigiacomo 27).

cultural, in this case—attributes. Particularly in Argentina, then, where foreign artists founded early popular theatre, we can speak of a cultural practice whose original critical distance from local culture would continue to be maintained even by *criollo* writers, directors, and performers. Meanwhile, the improvisational nature of this practice makes it a natural foreigner to entrenched repertoire and *habitus*.

For the uninitiated, *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* (Kurt Land 1956), a movie pretending to document the staging of a *revista* spectacle, provides key insight into the causes and effects of this theatrical form's ad-libbed nature. In part, the sheer number of performers makes deviations from the plan inevitable. Other actors, or even unprofessional onlookers, end up filling in for those who are indisposed. Big stars, like Pedro Quartucci and Alfredo Barbieri, prefer to rely on their improvisational skills rather than memorizing the script, which they literally rip to pieces. Without an overarching plot or unifying script, confusion can arise as to the order of the scenes. The director has trouble keeping tabs on everyone, and can only cling for his life to the expression "the show must go on" (*la función no puede suspenderse*) to keep the performance in motion.

The elements of today's televised sketch antedate its medium. These elements, present in turn-of-the century *revista,* include short, unrelated or loosely connected comic sketches; comic monologue; music and dance routines with or without comic intent; rapidity of transition from one modality to the next; commentary, overt or otherwise, on current events; informality of speech; often bawdy content; importance of improvisation to production and / or presentation of works. While acknowledging televised sketch's copious herd of potential theatrical forebears, it behooves my objectives to single out

revista as the particular form unifying many disparate influences into the sort of production that seems to most closely prefigure the sketch programs that have so often filled out US late-night programming, at the same time attracting truly massive audiences in Argentina. While vaudeville and music hall, for example, obviously have familial ties to these programs, their emphasis on *variety* differentiates them from the relatively streamlined structure (monologue, music, dance, and comic *cuadros*) shared by *revista* and televised sketch.

In this chapter, I examine a compact *corpus* of texts that nevertheless includes enough diversity to allow me to trace the evolution of *revue* / *revista* from its origins in France, through Spain, to Argentina. The massive influx of European immigration into Argentina during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would create a middle class whose relative economic progress would not be matched by gains in political power. To the contrary, the new middle classes would remain yoked to a sociopolitical machine operated chiefly by the same oligarchic interests that controlled the country before their arrival. In such an environment, sketch's undermining of official discourses must have seemed particularly attractive. Later, as the remainder of the twentieth century brought a series of rapid political and economic shifts and conflicts, sketch's cultivation of a certain aloofness from officially prescribed *habitus* and repertoire, and emphasis upon improvisation and spontaneity, may well have provided audiences not just with an emotional outlet, but with a survival tool for difficult times.

EUROPEAN REVUE: MOMUS SETS THE STAGE—FROM FRANCE TO SPAIN

As Robert Dreyfus (1909) informs us, if we were to boil the *revue* down to its most elemental definition—a comical / satirical theatrical work treating current events—we would have to go all the way back to Aristophanes for the primordial texts. On the other hand, the first such work to receive the name *revue*, *La revue des théâtres,* was written by Italian actors / authors Dominique and Jean-Antoine Romagnesi, and "jouée en décembre 1728, à la foire Saint-Laurent, [on the outskirts of Paris], par les comédiens italiens" (Dreyfus 4).

La revue des théâtres differs from 19th century *revista* in some significant ways, but nevertheless contains various elements that would later define the genre. Chief among these is *revista's* meta-performativity, which in some cases includes meta-theatricality. Some *revistas* take as their objective "material" the repertoire and *habitus* of real social actors; others make use of various sorts of non-theatrical performance such as popular song and dance; and still others focus on theatre, even on *revista* itself. *La revue des théâtres* gives reason to believe that *revista's* metatheatrical tendency goes back to its origins, as the *actualité* treated by the Romagnesis' *revue* is none other than a lineup of the year's comedies, personified and introduced in pairs, before an impartial judge, Momus, sent by Apollo himself to "faire un examen general de toutes les piéces qui ont été répresentées pendant cette année; de punir, ou de recompenser selon leur merite, les Auteurs et les Acteurs qui les ont données & acceptées" (55-56).

Though Thalia might come to mind first in terms of the mythos of comic performance, in Momus we have, I think, the true patron saint of *revue, revista,* and sketch. There are no weddings in revue / sketch. There is no “working through”—Paul Julian Smith’s term (10) for sitcom’s tendency to disrupt the relationships between its characters by presenting them with difficult social issues, only to have them reestablish the integrity of the social contract through acts of benevolent tolerance. This sort of ideological *bien-pensantisme*, perhaps as essential to liberal democracy as prudish, Gorkyist social realism has been to socialism, has no place in sketch comedy nor in theatrical revue. To the contrary, both forms tend to maintain an ideological anarchy that—like Momus, who was cast out of Olympus due to his incapacity for flattery, and like Capusotto’s Siddharta Kiwi—refuses, or is unable, to take sides.

A strange judge, who judges without issuing a verdict, Momus encourages the audience to adopt his own quintessentially critical viewpoint, from which even the striving of the gods appears absurd. In *La revue des théâtres,* his objective as theatrical arbiter is not to designate winners or losers, but to allow each work or venue to express its own laughable attributes. As he says of the authors whose plays are to make their appearance before him, “qu’ils n’attendent pas que je les flatte: Momus est trop ami de la verité” (56).

If we may judge from Momus’ character in this play, grasping the truth, according to him, has not so much to do with perception of eternally fixed values, as with the maintenance of critical distance from those values—a distancing that allows him to see the sociopolitical dynamics at work behind them, and to thereby access a nuanced,

holistic impression of his environment, akin perhaps to the understanding striven towards by today's social scientist. But his expression of this understanding aims at a popular, not an academic audience.

Though the French version of this theatrical form would eventually have a direct impact on its Argentinian cousin, the initial path leading from the *revue* to the *revista criolla* took a detour through Spain. Here, in part due to the economic crisis of 1866-1868, as well as to the necessity of adapting show times to the variable urban work schedule (Ordaz, Montenegro, and Horvath 68), old theatrical forms such as the *zarzuela grande* had begun to give way to shorter, hour-long functions presented four times in an afternoon. In 1886, one of these short works, *La Gran* Vía, a creation of Felipe Pérez y González (libretto) and Federico Chueca (music), attracted massive audiences in Madrid and went on to become an international success, making appearances in various European cities as well as New York and, eventually, Buenos Aires, where it would spawn a series of parodies, effectively giving birth to the *revista criolla*.

In some ways, *La Gran Vía* resembles a *zarzuela de género chico*, but as Christopher Webber (89) points out, because of the lack of plot development from one scene to the next and the allegorical or otherwise personified nature of its characters, this work really represents a transition from *zarzuela* to a particularly Spanish sort of *revista*. Since they will resurface later in the Argentinian *revista criolla* and *revista porteña*, it is essential that I describe some of the new features brought to the *revue* by its migration to Spanish soil.

I have mentioned the importance of the fact that revue places bodies in a space where they may for a short time experience a kind of *dépaysement* that places them at a critical distance from their own culture or even their own *habitus*. The setting of a work, the fictional space superimposed upon the real place of the theatre, thus acquires special significance, as it imaginatively projects this feeling of foreignness into some extra-theatrical reality. In comparison with that of *La revue des théâtres*, *La Gran Vía's* setting implies an invasion of administered, *civilized* space by the anarchic spirit of revue. The former work sets its action in Montmartre, a *forain* place, both in the sense of being literally outside Paris, as well as figuratively outside the bounds of lettered culture, represented by Montparnasse. On the other hand, in *La Gran Vía,* named after a thoroughfare existing only in Madrileñan imagination until its construction began in 1910, the action sets itself squarely in the capital city itself. Further, a good many of the work's characters are *personifications* of this city's streets, who speak in vulgar tongues, using words not registered in the Royal Academy's contemporaneous dictionary, engaging even in sexual double-entendre, and showing open contempt for authorities such as the police.

In addition to this virtual reclaiming of the city center as the site of near-carnivalesque openness of social interaction and freedom of speech, *La Gran Vía* also moves a step closer to the engagement with *actualité* that Dreyfus cites as being perhaps the most important thematic element of *revue*. This permits a much more direct critique of politics and social mores. Whereas in *La revue des théâtres,* the critical attitude filtered itself through the consideration of aesthetic issues, becoming perhaps most evident in a

debate between the Opera and the *Foire,* both personified, *La Gran Vía* brings aesthetics *and* the idea of progress into the mix, at the same time taking pot shots at some of the key political figures of the time.

In this respect, the work does not even exempt Maria Christina of Austria, who had the previous year (1885) become queen regent of Spain following the death of her husband, Alfonso XII; Scene III caricatures her as "Doña Virtudes, tipo de señora cursi" (22), a penny-pinching housewife who gets into a yelling match with her ex-maid, the slatternly Menegilda. Menegilda eventually gets the better of her, accusing Virtudes' husband of grafting public funds, and threatening to tattle on her former employer to her military boyfriend, whom (she lies) has just been made first sergeant—"Como que al decir <<sargento>> hasta el Gobierno se espanta" (25), she clarifies, for the benefit of onlookers, after Virtudes has stormed offstage.

Like some previous French *revues,*[20] *La Gran Vía* encourages the audience to regard with a healthy skepticism the self-proclaimed standard-bearers of progress, whose showy but often unrealistic projects are symbolized by the eponymous thoroughfare itself, here imagined as an unborn child carried by Doña Municipalidad. As the Calle Toledo comments, "Más valía que en vez de dar a luz nuevas calles se cuidara un poco de las que ya tiene *das* a luz… vamos al decir, *das* a la oscuridad, porque hay algunas en que de noche no se ven los dedos de la mano" (12). But while previous works might have used prototypical types to lampoon "the politician" or "the businessman" in general, *La Gran Vía* points a finger at real historical figures.

[20] See, for example, *1841 et 1941, ou aujourd'hui et dans cent ans* (1842).

One of these who turns up repeatedly: Francisco Romero Robledo, an important politician in the latter half of the 19th century who until recently had been aligned with the conservative Antonio Cánovas, key player in the post-1874 Restoration and habitual advocate of return to the Bourbon dynasty. However, after the death of Alfonso XII and the subsequent brief left-hand turn taken by the government, Romero opportunistically switched camps, turning down the sheets with general José López Domínguez, not just a liberal, but one who had actively participated in the 1868 dethroning of Isabel II (Bahamonde y Martínez 70). Apparently, *La Gran Vía's* audiences did not find Pérez y González' cynical take on this bit of maneuvering excessively contrived: the new alliance appeared to call into question the depth of powerful liberals' commitment to their ideals, and to suggest that flashy new projects for civic action might well be just a game of smoke and mirrors.

Thus, in Scene III, which sets forth a discussion regarding possible alternative names for the still-imaginary artery, the Calle Mayor remarks piquantly that it ought to be called *La coalición romerista-izquerdista*; to which its conversant replies, just as saucily, "Pero eso no puede ser una calle. Eso es un callejón sin salida" (17).

Such lofty projects may come a dime a dozen, but *La Gran Vía's* central question seems to be, what have they to do with the *little* people? And upon various occasions the text argues that almost everyone fits into this category; e.g., page 11: "En Madrid, ya se ve, los pequeños son los más." However, there are two classes of such little people. The first, comprising those who freely admit to their diminutive condition, includes Menegilda, the Paseante en Corte—who openly broadcasts his status as curious idler—

and many of the personified streets themselves, but is probably most famously represented by *los tres ratas*, a trio of thieves who boast about their slippery and sneaky, rodent-like maneuvers, and upon whom, as we will see, a sort of theatrical metempsychosis would eventually perform its magic, transplanting their souls into typically *porteño* sorts of embodiment.

The second group of little ones, on the other hand, like Romero—"un chiquitín…que torea al país, y que pasa…con la *izquierda*" (39-41)[21]—attempts to project itself into the arena of the larger-than-life. The overall effect of this combination of characters is to bring the viewer back into her or his own particular body, with its specific, practical needs and desires[22] (the occasional sexual double-entendre would have contributed to this, not to mention the work's popular, danceable, and original music), as well as to arouse a salutary suspicion regarding the grand gestures of the political elite. Due to the scope of my present work, any reflection upon the actual social impact of the works in question must be limited to passing conjecture, but one can't help but note that the 1886 plan for construction of a *gran vía* did in fact fall through, in part because of popular resistance in neighborhoods that would have suffered the most traumatic change from the ensuing demolition and reconstruction efforts. In other words, the popular *other* within Madrileñan society, under- or unrepresented by mainstream history and official, prescriptive linguistics, nevertheless evidently spoke up and made itself heard.

[21] Here Pérez y González plays with the politician's last name, which happens to coincide with that of the great bullfighter Pedro Romero Martínez.

[22] In addition to cultivating a certain estrangement from one's own culture, Gilroy (159) suggests that refocusing on the *body* could help to build a new cosmopolitanism that would eschew nationalistic and racialist essentialisms in favor of emphasizing humanity's shared corporeality.

LA REVISTA ARGENTINA

We should not imagine the migration of *La Gran Vía* to Buenos Aires in 1887, just one year after its initial showing in Madrid, as the arrival of a solitary Spanish immigrant to faraway shores. By this time, large-scale European immigration had already been set in full swing by a combination of economic pressures and the promotional efforts of figures such as Domingo F. Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi; the latter figure went so far as to coin the phrase "gobernar es poblar." By 1915, five million immigrants would have arrived, changing forever the country's demographics. Many of these new residents formed part of the great exodus of Italian peasants who left their own overpopulated environs, in the hope of finding a better life in the Americas.

In addition to the Italians, however—not to mention the French, English, Germans, etc.—Argentina would also see a great influx of Spaniards, who found themselves relatively well-adapted linguistically, and to some extent culturally, in their new country. This happy coincidence facilitated their relatively rapid entry into certain industries, particularly those of the cultural variety, such as the press, and, importantly for our purposes, theatre. Indeed, at the time of *La Gran Vía's* arrival in Argentina, most theatrical companies here were almost exclusively Spanish. Justo S. López de Gómara, the Spanish author of the first *revista* produced in Argentina that I will consider in detail here, commented that the greatest difficulty in staging his 1890 work was "la falta de

artistas que pudieran personificar, con la exactitud indispensable, tipos esencialmente argentinos" (Seibel, 2009).

This prevalence of Spanish culture profoundly affected popular theatre in Argentina. Beyond the enthusiastic reception of *La Gran Vía*, and its adoption as a kind of template, admittedly with important modifications, for elaboration of the Argentinian *revista,* one can see the whole system of early Argentinian popular theatre as an adaptation, and diversification, of Spanish *género chico*, with its flexible schedule, relatively abbreviated form, and popular content. Thus, like the Italian authors of the first *revue,* the roots of *porteña* popular culture are foreign.[23] Regardless, due to the cosmopolitan nature of Buenos Aires, we can say without fear of falling into paradox that this foreignness only made them more particularly Argentinian. Eventually their contributions would be built upon by native-born humorists who established comic traditions based on that acuity of observation granted by a certain degree of "estrangement" from local culture.

"ARGENTINO EN ESPAÑA, Y ESPAÑOL EN ARGENTINA"

Thus, Justo S. López de Gómara, the author of many novels and plays, among them the 1890 *revista, De paseo en Buenos Aires*, was wont to describe himself. Having arrived in Argentina in 1880, Gómara dedicated himself to an astonishing variety of activities—banking, journalism, charity, politics, and so on—in his new country

[23] Even the Podestás, founders of what would eventually become known as "teatro criollo," were of Uruguayan origin.

(Gismera). *De paseo* shows familiarity with many cultural features of the place and a desire to rebuild the structure of Spanish *revista* in such a way so as to make it particularly *rioplatense*.

In her unique book chapter,[24] Ana Ruth Giustachini traces the development of *revista* from its Spanish to its Argentinian form, concluding that the latter version mainly varied from its European progenitor by way of intensifying the political satire. I suspect that, had she had access in 1994 to the Pantagruelian array of information available to today's internaut—whereby one may easily make the connection, for example, between "Doña Virtudes" and María Cristina de Habsburgo—she might have reformulated her appraisal of *La Gran Via*'s satirical content, which she describes as a "suave crítica política" (95). Indeed, certain Argentinian works, such as *De paseo,* never single out any real Argentinian politician for ridicule, but revert to the practice of personifying classes or *sorts* of people. Certainly, as we will see, subsequent *revistas* would take up the *Gran Vía* model in this sense, but it would be difficult to judge whether they surpass their Spanish progenitor in acerbity. Meanwhile, though it is admittedly a kind of hybrid work, one may note other aspects of *De paseo* that clearly identify it as a precursor of the specifically Argentinian *revista criolla*, which would eventually give way to the more modern *revista porteña,* a form that would, in turn, find itself reincarnated to some extent in sketch comedy on television and in other electronic mass media.

To begin with, let us consider the nature of a recurrent *revista* character, a figure we might designate, for lack of a better term, the *observer*. As the etymology of its

[24] To date, the only attempt to apply detailed textual analysis to a small corpus of *revista* texts.

appellation suggests, re-vue is a spectacle that calls attention to its spectacular-ness, and the presence of the diegetic observer helps to emphasize this quality. Further, as we have seen in Momus of *La revue des théâtres*, the association of this role with *foreignness* entices the audience to leave aside its own over-civilized approach to the phenomena that the *revista* re-presents. In a move that other *revistas* would repeat over and over, *De paseo*—full title: *De paseo en Buenos Aires. Bosquejo local en dos actos y diez cuadros*—assigns a *literally* foreign character to the role of the observers whose gaze effectively de-automatizes the audience's perception, encouraging it to see locally typical events, people, and behaviors as if for the first time.

What's more, *De paseo* adds what would come to be another particularly *porteño* angle to the *revista's* emphasis on observation, blurring the line between staged performance and everyday repertoire and *habitus*. Over a quarter century before Pirandello's critically acclaimed ruptures of the fourth wall, this sort of mechanism had already become common procedure in the *revista criolla*. *De paseo*'s "Introducción" opens with a conflict between a policeman who announces that the spectacle has been shut down by "order of the higher-ups," and a spectator who protests and is hauled off to the police station. This scene likely is a nod to some well-known previous works, like *El sombrero de Don Adolfo* (1875) and *Don Quijote en Buenos Aires* (1885), whose comments upon current events and politics proved too much for the governments of the time to tolerate.

Mauro supports her claim that *revista* was essentially a collaborationist genre by citing the fact that government functionaries during Argentina's *década infame*—in the

1930s—“se sentaban en la platea para reírse de sus imitadores” (72). Castro, however, points out that General José Félix Uriburu, for one, “did not attend [the *revista Gran manicomio nacional*] or, as far is known, any other play critical of his regime.” Meanwhile, rather than ascribe the presence of other officials to any supposed “complicidad” (Mauro, 72) of the works themselves, Castro argues that agents of the government “more likely attended this play and many others of similar vein to ensure that the government was well informed of potential critics and enemies of the regime” (49).

There is a good chance, supported by the opening scene cited above, that governmental vigilance was already operational in 1890. This would account for the pulling of political punches in *De paseo,* a work that I would nevertheless hesitate to call collaborationist, at least in the sense that Mauro uses the word. Sociopolitical upheavals in 1890 created a situation whose instability would have had everyone on edge, politicians and general populace alike, and the work in question appears to tiptoe gingerly along the edge of the satirical precipice. In this year, the financial bubble created by the original economic liberals, whose initiatives prefigured certain practices all too familiar to students of the latter half of the 20th century, burst due to the unwise investments of certain European—primarily British—interests, drastically reducing the market value of Argentinian primary commodities and creating a correspondingly precipitous drop in the price of labor.

Though no names are named, *De paseo* paints a clear picture of both sides of the situation—fat-cat investors as well as the common folk they affected with their irresponsible actions. Gómara situates the investors in their native environment. Here, in

the stock market, we find the "Coro de Corredores," who brazenly boast that no matter which way the deals go, "yo gano siempre, pues tengo segura doble comisión" (246); a "[*sociedad*] Anónima," whose ups and downs, though unpredictable for the many, guarantee the good fortunes of the few who know her intimately; and the railroad impresarios John Bull and Sterling, among the first of a long line of British *revista* characters whose capacity for economic rapine is only equaled by their inability to conjugate verbs in *castellano*: "Concesión o contrato / gustarme mucho a mí / pues grandes beneficios / yo siempre conseguir. / En libras enviamos / el oro a este país / y al volver a mis cajas / en arrobas venir" (250).

Various other characters, native and foreign, but both alien to the capitalist centers symbolized by the Brits, represent the other side of the always-scarcer coin. These include a trio of *cuervitos* who represent the *porteño* avatars of *La Gran Vía*'s three *ratas*; a woman and her son-in-law whose domestic dispute lands them in the police station with Diego, the immigrant / fictional audience member who protested the suppression of the spectacle itself; and el Conde del Tupé, another immigrant whose predicament I shall describe in a moment. As the son-in-law explains, his domestic disturbance reflects the usual tensions between in-laws, but also to the extra economic stresses of the moment: "Yo señor soy empleado / y tengo muy poco sueldo, / seis chicos que me dio Dios… / un furibundo casero / que me sube el alquiler / cada trimestre lo menos; / y como si aun fuera poco, / esta suegra…" (215-216).

The central drama in *De paseo* revolves around the Conde de Tupé, whose ridiculous title ironically asserts its own falsity, as he vacillates between the predatory

foreignness of the Englishmen, and the proletarian solidarity exemplified by both *criollos and* hard-working foreigners. Like the Englishmen, he initially comes to the country hoping to make an easy living through tricky financial maneuvering. In an aside, he describes his strategy: "Yo vengo aquí a hacer dinero como quien dice, de lance. Otros más pobres están; yo casi tengo un tesoro pues poseo una onza de oro, verdadero talismán. Con ella vivo hace un año pasando por caballero, y aparentando dinero a este timo, al otro engaño, pues como cambio no llevo, pagan los otros por mí" (224). Desperately attached to his doubtful title, he tries to avoid anyone finding out that he mixes with the common masses in the *Asilo de Inmigrantes*, and refuses to confess to possessing the needs or the functions of the body; "Está muy bien que trabaje el que nace hombre vulgar, más yo me sé respetar. A mí me parece cursi y prosaico el sudor" (266). Finally, however, though perhaps only out of necessity, he sides with the virtuous proletarians, as the loss of his golden fetish convinces him of the need to put his carcass in motion, and he goes to work as a porter.

If *De paseo* shows any collaborationist tendencies, they apply not to the support of the ruling oligarchy, but to the diffusion of a prudish ideology that reminds one of Maxim Gorky's socialist realism. The moralistic exhortations of the *coro de inmigrantes*, and the insistence of don País upon the virtues of Argentinian women, "Ángeles del cielo…llenas de dulces encantos, que pueblan de hogares santos mi venturosa nación" (269), lack comic appeal and contrast strangely with the previous, more lighthearted exhibitions of picaresque pickpockets, sharp-tongued mothers-in-law, and slyly unfaithful housewives. *De paseo*'s massive acclaim may have been achieved in spite of, rather than

because of these sententious scenes, and the "lujo excepcional" of the mise-en-scène, as well as the presence of "dos de nuestros mejores payadores de la campaña" (Seibel, 19), could very well have helped tip the balance in its favor.

Finally, though as Gismera informs us, Gómara was in fact a self-identified socialist, his *revista'*s occasionally preachy tone, absent from subsequent exemplars of the genre, could also have something to do with the messianic complex of an immigrant still in the process of adjusting his utopic ideals to the reality of his new environment. All the same, the work's realistic treatment of poverty and critical take on the country's economic leadership must have seemed refreshing to the rapidly growing, financially struggling, politically disenfranchised middle classes in 1890s Buenos Aires. Despite the heterogeneity of their origins, they were united in their shared *outsider* status vis a vis the collusion of local oligarchs and foreign economic interests.

¿UN DUELO SIN DUELO DESPUÉS?

Prestigiacomo (26) draws a connection between the slew of *revistas* appearing around the year 1890 and the sociopolitical unrest of this period, which gave rise, among other phenomena, to the *Revolución del Parque* and the formation of the *Unión Cívica,* whose radical faction would give voice to the middle classes. Indeed, Marco et al. associate the development of this frustrated middle sector with *género chico* in general, this latter expressive of "otra oposición" (65) to the current political machine, besides the frictions perpetrated by elite challengers whose main concern was to secure their own

respective positions in the power structure. *Otra revista,* a work written by native Argentinian Miguel Ocampo and produced in 1891, seems by its title to confirm Prestigiacomo's notion regarding the virulence of this outbreak of *revista* spectacles.

Mauro claims that the evolution of *revista porteña* from *revista criolla*, with the dropping of any pretense of an overarching plot scheme, did not occur until the influential visit, in 1922, of the Frenchwoman Madame Rasimi and her troupe of *bataclanas*. However, three decades earlier, *Otra revista* already employs the apparently random structure typifying both *revista porteña* and televised sketch comedy. This work disposes entirely with the device of the diegetic "observer," leaving the audience to form its own impressions of the 17 short scenes, which include such disparate content as the following: a comic speech given by an impersonator of the romantic poet Carlos Guido y Spano; an aborted duel between two cynical gentlemen; and a confrontation between personifications of the old Buenos Aires dock and the new *Dársena Sud*, in a dispute that must have reminded culturally competent audience members of the complaints voiced by older streets of Madrid in *La Gran Vía*. This structural disjointedness must be taken into account, in association with revue's irreverent aping of *habitus* / repertoire, as well as its foreign-born skepticism regarding official discourses, in order to explain the popularity and social function of *revista*—and, eventually, sketch comedy—in a society whose ever-increasing vulnerability to economic and political upheaval would make spontaneity and improvisational thinking essential for survival.

A significant portion of this flexibility would depend upon the ability to separate political claims from the motivations behind them. Such awareness must have made itself

particularly valuable in the years following the *Revolución del Parque,* which appeared to be a failed popular uprising but turned out to be a plot contrived between ex-presidents Julio Argentino Roca and Bartolomé Mitre. These two men, purported antagonists in the conflict, in reality plotted together to thwart at once the populist aspirations of Leandro Alem and the more conservative designs of the president, Miguel Juárez Celman, who had been hand-picked by Roca himself for the presidency, but whose ambitious maneuvering had begun to threaten Roca's continued supremacy as political puppet-master (Rock, 1985: 160). The decisive ruse was pulled off by General Manuel Campos, the insurgents' military chief, who instead of following the previously agreed-upon plan to take the Casa Rosada, invented spurious reasons for holding his troops back and restricting his actions to the Parque de Artillería. This ruined Alem's attempt at a takeover, but still allowed for sufficient collateral damage to discredit Juárez Celman's presidency, resulting in his ouster and replacement by former vice-president Carlos Pellegrini, a functionary more to Roca's liking.

Considering the need—testified to by the opening scene of *De paseo*—for discretion in the presentation of politically-oriented satire, *Otra revista's* duel scene might be taken for a safely oblique commentary on the recent political histrionics. Though everything begins according to expectation, with the offender and the offended arriving at the predetermined site with their seconds and greeting each other cordially, deviations from the romantic ideal soon become apparent. The dialogue leads the audience to suspect the dispute at hand has more to do with the stomach than with the heart, when one of the opposing *padrinos* first addresses the offended man

appropriately—"Tengo el honor de saludar al valiente defensor de su honra"—but then adds in an aside, "y de su empleo" (345). As it turns out, one of the would-be combatants, a journalist, has publicly called the other a thief, and the other, to protect his position, has accused his criticizer of lying.

Just before they are to begin slicing away at each other, the journalist asks for a moment alone with his enemy, so as to haltingly explain, "no he tratado de ofender a Ud.; no le conozco; pero si…no insulto a Ud...como caballero, no…como" (346). It so happens that one of the seconds has anticipated the duelists' subsequent agreement, drafting beforehand a report proclaiming that the combatants fought valiantly for two hours without wounding each other, until the seconds stopped the fight, "quedando salvado el honor"—as well as the respective paychecks, we must assume—"de los duelistas" (347).

This agreement could very well allude to the pact reached between Roca and General Campos before the *Revolución del Parque* on the 26th of July, 1890. If so, the high-class associations of the duel ritual would have made it clear the satire was directed at the unscathed oligarchic instigators of the battle, and not at the 1500 wounded or dead—most, like the majority of *revista* writers, actors, and audiences, not attached to illustrious surnames. Meanwhile, just as war produces dead bodies, international capitalism reifies live ones, and this forms the central theme of the next work I will discuss, Enrique de María's *Ensalada criolla* (1898).

To the Bitter Beginning

As we have seen in the case of *Otra revista,* structural innovation may appeal just as much to popular audiences as to a hyperliterate elite. While *Ensalada criolla* returns to the convention of the "observer" as connecting thread between the disparate sketches, its singular adaptation of content to reflect the economic, social and political realities of its environment, as well as its groundbreaking combination of native author, actors, musicians, and venue-owners, mark it as the first ever *revista criolla*.

In her mini-review of the history of *revista criolla*, Mauro alludes to its connection with the circus: "Cuenta *la leyenda* (porque es muy difícil encontrar un relato histórico respecto a este tema) que uno de los antecedentes de la revista en Argentina es el circo" (72, italics mine). On one hand, my own experience confirms her assessment of the general state of *revista* scholarship. On the other hand, we do at least possess concrete evidence of a solid link between circus and *revista*. As various authors have noted (e.g. Prestigiacomo, Seibel), not only was *Ensalada criolla* produced by the Podestás[25] themselves, but the venue of its first showing was in fact "el circo Pabellón General Lavalle, de Libertad y Tucumán" (Seibel, 25).

In a way, the Podestá's shifting focus, from the rural setting of their groundbreaking *Juan Moreira* to the urban environs of *Ensalada criolla: revista callejera en un acto*, repeats the transition—only this time in *tono criollo*—from country to city that we have already observed in the development of the European revue. Here, too, the

[25] In the 1880s the Uruguayan Podestá family originated a particularly *porteño* kind of circus, later transitioning to the boards, where they would bring about the effective *criollización* of a theatre system that had formerly depended almost exclusively upon European writers and actors.

exhortation, directed at the audience, to readjust to corporal reality and question the naturalness of urban repertoire / *habitus*, reaches a new intensity, one that would not be equaled, perhaps, until Capusotto's televised hijinks a century later.

The year 1898 reveals an Argentina that has righted itself, at least in macroeconomic terms, after the crisis of the first part of the decade. An ever-expanding workforce, fueled by massive immigration, combined with exponential extension of the railroad system, allowed the country to begin paying off its debts ahead of time, and the value of the peso rose accordingly. However, this economic growth remained almost exclusively dependent upon exploitation of primary resources, in large part funded by foreign investment. As David Rock (1985: 169) reports, this trend would continue until war broke out, so that in 1914 "foreign investments represented about half of Argentina's total capital stock, and their value was two and a half times that of the gross domestic product." Also, in practical terms, the wealth, managed by a government still controlled by Roca and his oligarchic set, tended to concentrate in the hands of wealthy landowners and the Buenos Aires financial establishment, social actors closely linked to the foreign investors themselves.

Buenos Aires, a primate city concentrating the country's economic and political power, thus became the setting for an elaborate social drama populated by characters motivated by a chance at a piece, however infinitesimal, of this gigantic pizza pie. *Ensalada criolla* shows an eminently metatheatrical awareness of these circumstances—one facilitated, I will argue, precisely by Argentina's still peripheral situation relative to the centers of developing global capitalism.

After the 1890 crisis, the government had defaulted on a portion of its external debt, making amends, in part, by privatizing public interests and putting them in the hands of foreign—mainly British—companies. As Rock reports, though foreign investment dropped off during the worst years of the crisis, by 1898 the rallying economy witnessed the approach of a new wave of British investors eager to begin the cycle again. *Ensalada criolla* puts just such a character in the role of the diegetic observer; called simply "el Inglés," this personage confesses with typically unconjugated candor, "Mi venir comisionado de Inglaterra para estudiar costumbres, tipos y productos nacionales; para cerciorarme, si es posible hacer nuevos empréstitos" (416).

This observer's naïveté and earnest application to his job—carefully jotting down particularities of local speech—might bring a blush to the face of any studious Anglophone in Buenos Aires, but the student of *revista* will also note in him a particular resemblance to that singular representative of Western capitalism, the self-satisfied bourgeois. The foreignness of this character, and the fact that none of the work's *criollo* characters share his happy consciousness, create a vivid portrayal of a society whose peripheral situation in world capitalism might be partially compensated for by a general liveliness that comes of not expecting the social machine to keep to the tracks as predictably as a well-oiled locomotive.

Their *un*happy consciousness, of course, comes with a price, that of the awareness of one's own alienation and reification as a cog in the neocolonial economic machine. Despite its humorous bent, *Ensalada criolla* also seems bent upon emphasizing this aspect of everyday life in Buenos Aires, whose great pecuniary blaze draws an

innumerable quantity of relatively hapless moths to the flame. After the Englishman announces his intention to *purchase*—for all practical purposes—not just the fruits of the land, but also "costumbres y tipos"—i.e. culture and the people who produce it—we, and he, are presented with another scene in which the publicist "Tartabuli," self-proclaimed "rey del reclamo" (417) passes by advertising a great gathering of these "productos," sponsored by a certain "señor medio chiflado" (418). The location of this *ensalada criolla*, Palermo, should attract our attention, as this is where the Sociedad Rural has held its annual showing of livestock ever since 1878.

Just to drive home the point, when Tartabuli announces the imminent exposition of these *costumbres y tipos*, one of the onlookers interrupts him; "¡Como vos!" he exclaims, at which the advertising man takes great offense. However, Tartabuli is not alone, as the bulk of the rest of the play devotes itself to the exhibition of various *porteño* characters, most of them headed to the cattle lots in Palermo. Amongst them: another unhappy set of in-laws with money troubles; a cook who feigns grandeur by claiming to be a descendant of "los Mitres y los Rocas" (422); a maid and her military boyfriend who undoubtedly reminded the audience of Menegilda and her truculent beau from *La Gran Vía*; the latest incarnation of the "tres ratas," here a trio of *cuchilleros* whose disparate skin tones—*rubio, pardo, y negro*—do nothing to hide the essential unity of their shared *habitus*, which is that of the *guapo*;[26] and a customs official who, much to the bewilderment of the Englishman, pays twice as much in rent as the sum total of his official salary.

[26] In Argentinian dialect, "tough guy."

Since revue's French origins, these works have tended to end with an "apotheosis," reuniting all the work's characters in a final scene known for its great fanfare and hoopla. *Ensalada criolla* achieves this by presenting the exposition in Palermo of all the *tipos* appearing in the *revista,* now gathered together, like show cattle, to be awarded prizes by a personified *Industria*, as well as to have their economic potential assessed by the attentive Englishman. Such is the reification indicated by this scene that not just bodies, but customs and traditions, indeed whole *habitussen,* are put up for auction. Strangely enough, though, the presentation of all these "types" as *productos* for an externally manipulated economic mechanism does not minimize, but rather *emphasizes* the humanity of those who embody them. As it so happens, the year of *Ensalada criolla*'s opening, 1898, coincides with the re-establishment in Buenos Aires of the previously Uruguayan magazine *Caras y caretas*, a publication that included generous helpings of political satire. The immediate and massive popularity of this magazine indicates the extent to which its popular readership was aware of the idea that one's public face may not coincide with the real one.[27]

Ensalada criolla's Englishman, an emanation of classical economics' naturalization of capitalism and imperialist capitalism's repression of its bloody origins, is the only character in this work of whose one-dimensionality we may rest assured. Even the author himself admits to the possession of a fictional double, occupying a presence as character in his own work. While the Englishman's work seems to coincide perfectly

[27] To this day the term *careta* is used to refer to someone who hides her actual nature in order to achieve some sort of social advantage. Calling a person "careta" is certainly an insult, but it also implies that there may be more depth to the individual than what immediately meets the eye.

with his real character, Enrique de María maintains a careful separation between himself and his theatrical avatar. I have not been able to determine whether he actually acted in the *revista's* presentation, but the fact that the character identifies himself in the script only as "el Autor," not "Enrique de María,"[28] indicates the willing of a separation and the conscious calling of attention to this division.

Though this work aims principally at provoking audience laughter, it also has a dark side. Just like the play's other *porteño* characters, who like Tartabuli appear to assume their roles with some reluctance, Enrique de María makes it clear that *el Autor* exists, at least in part, as product of the system's coercion. After the Englishman announces his desire to see "costumbres, tipos y productos," the Author replies, "Pues, amigo, mi obra le viene a Ud. *como de encargo*" (416, italics mine). With this categorization of the *revista* as an *assignment* or *chore* carried out in fulfillment of an *order* from an external source, it would be hard to associate Enrique de María's Buenos Aires with Baudrillard's simulacrum, in which work and leisure are fused into one; rather, as is customary with *revista*—and sketch comedy in general, I will argue—some space is left in which to improvise, between the body and the discourses that would discipline it.

The existence of this space, I believe, relies in part upon a certain faith in the reality of the body itself, and of the body's ability to perceive the reality of the places in which it finds itself. The first part of the formula may depend upon maintenance of awareness of certain corporal parts—e.g., Bakhtin's "lower bodily stratum"—ignored by

[28] Compare, for example, with *Otra revista*, in which the "author" also makes an appearance, but identifies himself positively as "Miguelito Ocampo."

official discourses such as those pertaining to Victorian morality and socialist realism. De María's movement in this direction, though shy compared to televised comedy of the latter half of the 20th century, goes farther than any *revista* thus far. Importantly, he assigns this corporal awareness to a female character, "Juana," one of the Argentinian women Gómara's Don País tried to condemn to the exclusive role of "Ángeles del cielo…que pueblan de hogares santos mi venturosa nación." Indeed, the comedy in the dialogue between *Ensalada criolla*'s Juana and her beau arises precisely from the disjuncture between his PG-rated attempts to poeticize his attraction for her, and her drawing of the metaphors back to sexual intercourse; "Sos…el sol que por la mañana viene a alumbrar mi sendero," he emotes, and while scoffing at his mellifluousness, she indicates that she likes him anyway: "Me alegra tu relincho / porque de veras te quiero, / como la oveja al carnero, / como el arroyo al carpincho" (427).

The second part of opening up space between ideological discourse and the body would involve simply locating oneself, corporally, in the real physical space surrounding one. It would be hard to argue that Enrique de Maria had not spent considerable time walking the streets of his native Buenos Aires, which this *revista* claims to describe. Besides the "tipos y costumbres" portrayed here, the language employed by the work's characters is not the standardized Spanish taught in Anglophone classrooms. In various exchanges like the following one, de María draws our attention to this local specificity via the dialogue between the on-looking Englishman and the Author:

INGLÉS: ¿Qué querer decir cola de pato y polla calzada?

AUTOR: Se refiere a los jacquets y a las polainas.

INGLÉS: (*Anotando en su cartera*) ¡Ah!... ¡Al jacquets y pantalona! (446)

Also, I should note that as we have already seen in Juana's enunciations, the characters in this work make extensive use of *voceo*. While this and other characteristics of popular speech had already been employed for some time in popular theatre—e.g., *Juan Moreira* (1886)—they would be ignored and / or reviled for many years hence by the exponents of high literature.

Again, though, I want to make it clear that whatever the extent of their connection with popular culture, neither *Ensalada criolla,* nor any of the other *revistas* or sketch comedy shows I will discuss here, assume an attitude of *militant* political resistance. To do so would merely exchange one disciplinary discourse for another, when in fact the main practical function of this sort of comedy, I argue, is that of loosening up the body and mind, so as to find ways to survive no matter the particular brand of sociopolitical rhetoric bandied about. Even—or perhaps especially—in this most *criolla* of *revistas,* then, the association with local culture retains a sort of playful distance. The *revista*'s opening scenes set this tone, announcing to the public that the showing has been cancelled due to the indisposition of the leading actor, who was to play various important roles—"*papeles"*—and all of them *criollos*. A supposed member of the audience responds, shouting out that he would be happy to fill the missing actor's place: "Dígale usted a la empresa, que, si me permite, yo me atrevo a hacer esos *papelones*" (415, italics mine).

The theatre company's eager acceptance of his offer, and implicit agreement as to the nature of the roles he will play, indicates that the "tipos y costumbres" the work

displays are to be taken no more seriously than the earnest Englishman who has come to assess their financial potential. In fact, the *Autor* himself explains afterward these initial scenes: "Esa escenita de mi revista, es una especie de bitter, que le brindo al público, a fin de predisponerlo a tragarse mi Ensalada criolla" (416). Thus, de María prepares the audience to digest his work, by pointing out the constructed nature of profession and *habitus* / repertoire. Despite, or perhaps to some extent *because of,* being the first entirely native Argentinian *revista, Ensalada criolla* sets forth poignant commentary regarding the alienation experienced by workers at the beck and call of a developing global capitalism that subjugates them doubly—both as proletariat, and as inhabitants of the periphery.

SEX AND MONEY, ALL TANGLED UP

Most *revista* studies to date have involved little textual analysis of actual works, giving rise to a tendency to describe production as homogenous within certain time periods. Thus, for example, Prestigiacomo writes that "la década del 40 marca el fin de la revista política" (118), and while Mauro disagrees with her regarding the time period, she refers no less schematically to periods of production: e.g., "Pepe Arias se fue en los sesenta y con él el comentario político. Ganó la comicidad sexual" (3).[29]

[29] One should not underestimate the difficulty of locating *revista* texts in the first place, but this tendency toward homogenization could also reflect the persistence of a certain snobbery regarding popular cultural production. As González says of Argentinian *género chico*, "aún es fuerte el prejuicio de que en este corpus 'todas las obras son iguales', o que estas piezas 'no ofrecen nada particular para analizar'" (7). If this is true for *género chico* in general, it must be even more so for *revista,* often thought of as *género*

However, recognition of synchronic heterogeneity not only gives a more realistic picture of the historical development of *revista,* but also helps to dispel certain tendencies to dismiss this particularly Argentinian theatrical form as one depending primarily upon imitation of foreign cultural practice. In fact, as I have argued, the *revista criolla* reflects and reproduces a kind of *endemic* foreignness very particular to Argentinian culture, which does not restrict this cultural practice's capacity for original expression. I have mentioned the case of *Otra revista,* whose structural innovation precedes by a third of a century the arrival of the French *revue* company to which various scholars have attributed the adoption of its particularly disjointed style of formatting.

Neither, as we will see in the case of Enrique Buttaro's *Revista nacional* (1903), did the advent of the *revista* devoted to "sexual comedy" depend exclusively upon the second French invasion of 1954, when the *Folies Bergère* famously brought the first complete nudity to the stage of Argentinian *revue*.[30] Rather, as early as 1890-1921, usually thought of as belonging to early *revista criolla,* one already perceives a wide array of content presaging future aspects of Argentinian *revista*, from the guarded political commentary of *Otra revista*, to the blatant criticism of specific government officials in *Buenos Aires Q.E.P.D* (1915), to the social satire of *Ensalada criolla,* to the apparently exclusive focus on sexual comedy in Buttaro's work.

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chico's least serious offspring, and described even by one of its notable practitioners, Antonio Prat, as "la espuma de la cerveza" (Prestigiacomo 64).

[30] We should note that despite the Gallic audacity of 1954, nudity did not immediately become a standard element of Argentinian *revista*, but instead remained confined to *revista's* licentious sister, cabaret, where it had already been present for some time.

On the other hand, the existence of a *revista* whose title (*Revista nacional*) seems to indicate an engagement with the issue of sociopolitical identity, and whose content consists principally of *diálogos picantes* between three female / male pairs, and one MMF trio, raises a question that would already be obvious to feminist scholars like Gayle Rubin: does "exclusively sexual" content exclude a *revista* from the realm of the political, or wouldn't it merely indicate a different sort of political focus?

In *Teoría del género chico*—a work which, as I have said, despite its otherwise comprehensive nature, devotes precious little space to *revista*—Marco et al. argue that one may see popular theatrical production in the *República Conservadora*[31] (1880-1916) as representative of an increasingly influential middle class. Though lacking official political representation, this segment grew exponentially, acquired a certain economic solidity, and built sociopolitical agency that would contribute in part to the rise of the *Unión Cívica Radical*, only to see its will-to-power thwarted once again as Yrigoyen's and successive administrations' responsiveness to its demands proved less than ideal. Marco et al. emphasize the role of *género chico*'s "didacticismo" (95) in the formation of a middle class whose difficulties in enacting real social change would be due in part to the exchange of class consciousness for bourgeois family values.

Straight comedy—the realm of Thalia, that is—with its inevitable validation of the exchange of women, certainly would have contributed to this didactic effect and its imposition of ideological forces upon sexual interaction. But *revista* / sketch, as usual,

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[31] Generally used to refer to the years between Julio Argentino Roca's first presidency and the official breaking of the *Partido Autonomista Nacional*'s death-grip on national politics, with Hipólito Yrigoyen's 1916 election.

and as exemplified in *Revista nacional*, has something else to say. The audience would not be subjected to any weddings here, nor are there even any fathers who might consider giving their daughters away. The characters simply come together, two by two or two by three, in street settings, and involve themselves in amorous negotiations. Neither is *Revista nacional* a celebration of free love; quite the opposite, as this work emphasizes economic factors behind all its potential unions, and in each case money issues render consummation impossible. The system never enjoys the validating effect of romantic sexual union.

As Gayle Rubin suggests, capitalism thrives upon obscuring women's involvement in the economic process.[32] *Revista nacional*, on the other hand, presents female characters whose economic situation thrusts them out into the formally recognized workforce—i.e., women whose economic *otherness* in relation to bourgeois social structure disabuses them of the notion of husband as provider / protector, and puts them closer to Rubin's own awareness of domestic labor as integral to the production of surplus value. In short, they are not so naïve as to imagine that striking up a relationship with a man will result in their exemption from monetary or labor concerns. Neither the "Morocha," unimpressed by a security guard's offer to pay for her tramway ticket, nor "Ella," who resists the idea of a cheap date that would consist principally of making out on a park bench, nor the Mazamorrera, incensed by the two penniless poets' sexualizing of her culinary product, fail to recognize the economic side of romance. Even Carmen, who finally confesses the reciprocity of Eusebio's professed affections for her, does not

[32] "The exchange of women becomes an obfuscation if it is seen as a cultural necessity" (Rubin 177).

believe in unconditional love: “Pa ser dueño del cuarto / en que vivo yo / tiene que ir pagando / un mes al patrón” (19).

Far from being a place where, as its propagandists would have it, dreams are satisfied and desires fulfilled, here the (bourgeois / capitalist) marketplace functions primarily as a place of continual frustration—especially for the many whose paltry economic potential condemns them to a lifetime of window-shopping. In Argentina, these are the classes who spawned a form of music and dance whose eloquent expressions of the frustrations of the body are now celebrated even in the politest of circles. Fittingly, *Revista nacional* ends with a dance scene in which all participate, in typical “apotheosis” style, and which is narrated thusly by the choir:

> ELLOS: Estas son las que en “EL PRADO” / se almiraban como güenas, /
> cuando entraban a moverse, / balanciando las caderas.
>
> ELLAS: Estos son los codiciados / por las mozas, amasadas /
> en el juego de los tangos / y en el corte con quebrada. (21)

Like most successful artistic endeavors, the dancing of these professional actors onstage must have communicated easy grace, but Buttaro’s narration allows them to give voice to the suffering—not just psychological, but physical also, of the sort that would be despised by Gómara’s *Conde* and all who would aspire to his brand of *distinction*—at the root of seemingly facile adroitness: “Para meniar el cuerpo como nosotros, hay que sudar” (21). This bodily moisture serves as evidence that the sublimation achieved by the dancing is only an imperfect one, and one that by no means guarantees its performers

respite from the frustrations inherent to those who remain outside the fantasy of normative bourgeois familial relations.

A new Heaven, and a new Hell

Like other exemplars of its genre, the critical angle taken by the *revista Buenos Aires Q.E.P.D.,* written in 1915 by Ulises Favaro and Luis Bayón Herrera, emphasizes the disparity between actual lived, bodily experience and the discourses seeking to contain and direct this experience. The opening scene establishes this distinction via a comic dialogue between a satirized version of the Argentinian astronomer Martín Gil, and his servant, José. It opens with Gil peering through his telescope and announcing grandiloquently that according to his rather abstruse calculations, the weather should remain calm throughout the night. However, José soon arrives and advises the *señorito* to take his umbrella along when he goes out, as there is bound to be a terrific storm. The basis for this prognosis: a bunion on one of José's toes, which hurts fiercely when ugly weather impends. As it turns out, the servant's hunch proves correct, and the ensuing storm and flood—no doubt referencing the real catastrophe that occurred in Buenos Aires in 1914—drown the city, providing pretext for the otherworldly scenes that follow.

Though Argentina of the 1910s would not be so pressured to take up arms as it was in the Second World War, it certainly felt effects of the conflict, as Britain used its chokehold on the country's economy to control the destination of its exports, effectively cutting off commerce with Germany and allied countries. Also, however, British

domination of Argentinian economics began to be rivaled by US influence, and as Jonathan Ebel reports, despite its relatively late entry into the war, it was in the Protestant, evangelical United States where the conflation of religious and martial rhetoric perhaps reached its most fevered pitch. Ebel's study of the day's popular literature and letters sent home by soldiers shows that common opinion painted the conflict as no less than a holy war, whose objective was to "rid Christian Europe of the Hun, redeem the Holy Land from the Turk, and forge a 'new heaven and new earth'" (36).

Maybe the new economic ties with the United States had alerted Argentinian consciousness to the prevailing attitude in the North American country, or perhaps Europe itself engaged in similar conflations of religious and patriotic duty. Whatever the case, similarly bellicose notions of Christian sacrifice and redemption seem to inform *Buenos Aires Q.E.P.D.'s* satirical portrait of "el Paraíso celestial," where William II gets together with his hero, Napoleon, to engage in some homosocial bonding—"no me impulsa otro afán / que legar a la historia del imperio Alemán / el brillo que tu nombre dio a la historia," (30) Willie gushes—before both of them lay bare their swords and gallop off to spur their men on to more bloodshed. This curious demonizing of heaven reaches its full expression in the words of Saint Peter himself—or San Pietro, more precisely, speaking, as per the stage directions, "en la jerga habitual de los napolitanos acriollados" (27)—who informs us that to stave off boredom he is writing a book which he eventually plans to send to Earth "para que sepan los mortales que en ninguna parte se está tan mal como en el paraíso" (28).

Just as on the battlefield, here in heaven one begins to feel as though a great deal of the ill will can be traced back to an unnatural dividing up of the sexes. Here, even San Pietro often engages in violence, "boleando ángeles" (28) who attempt to curb their own boredom by breaking into the ward of the "once mil vírgenes" (32). The place's inhospitableness is emphasized when the *lunfardo*-speaking couple, Carolina and Pardales, arrive at the pearly gates after having drowned in the flood, and San Pietro informs them that they must part ways here, as Carolina must live "nel departamento de la virgene," and Pardales "nel de lo angelito" (33). Pietro rebuffs their inevitable protests with typically military eloquence—"Cuesta e la ordine cagay!"—and their eventual decision—"si no ha de ser unidos no vamos ni al mismo cielo" (33), sends them in the direction of the infernal reaches, where, as it turns out, the damned reside much more *a sus anchas* than their saintly counterparts in heaven.

Effectively, the last scene takes us to the underworld, precisely to a corner of it that the devil has set up in imitation of the Buenos Aires cabaret, the Royal Pigall. Here, in the Luzbel Pigall, as the Dark Prince has named his creation, the *revista*, perhaps not so paradoxically after all, stages its *apoteosis*—the final gathering of all the *revista's* characters, by now a tradition within the genre for over a quarter century. The Devil's opening words establish the significance of the place as counterbalance to the less than idyllic heaven portrayed in previous scenes. Whereas a spirit of boredom and prudish

segregation of the sexes reigned in paradise, here in Hell "On chant! On rit! On bochinch!" (1).[33]

Meanwhile, the violence of heaven—closely aligned, I insist, with the mass murder currently taking place on Earth—has no place here, as "La paz universal / se firma en el Pigall. / Las batallas no existen / donde vive el carnaval" (36). When he overhears Carolina and Pardales celebrating their arrival here, but also lamenting the fate of those tormented souls still stuck in the more ethereal realm, the Devil determines to save them as well: "¡Una tea! Voy a incendiar el infierno para que caiga sobre sus ruinas el Cielo" (36). The resulting admixture of otherworldly beings—"Ángeles y demonios, formad mil matrimonios y dancemos el baile tropical lascivo y bullanguero [la machicha]"—represents the completion of Satan's surprisingly generous plan for making restitution to those destroyed by the flood: "No os podéis quejar de mí, / mortales a quien ahogué; / si en vida os martiricé, / en la muerte os divertí / fundando este cabaret" (35).

One wonders if there could be any more perfect symbol of *revista's* general mission—to challenge all official discourses of spirit, or mind, over body, by employing laughter and sexuality to reactivate corporal awareness—than this demonic *apoteosis*. In the face of the West's martial efforts to establish world economic and cultural hegemony based on capitalist neo-imperialism and Christianity, *Buenos Aires Q.E.P.D.* situates its paradise precisely within those *lower regions*—in both the corporeal and the theological sense—shunned and / or designated as "foreign" by mainstream Western thought.

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[33] This comic Gallicizing of *bochinchear* serves—as does the use of the name Pigall, for that matter—as an indication of recent French influence on Buenos Aires nightlife. As Pellarolo reports, many French artists immigrated to Argentina during the early years of the war.

HAHA FUNNY?

As we have seen, since the beginning, *revue* has tended to incorporate some auto-criticism into its content, displaying a tendency not to take itself too seriously. Few genres seem more likely to pass themselves off as "just entertainment." All the same, any long-standing cultural practice runs the risk of becoming excessively formulaic and losing its potential for de-automatizing our perception of lived experience. Given this eventuality, the role of satiric parody as renovating force becomes especially important.

Most *revue,* like sketch, relies heavily upon parody of *other* artistic forms, but only occasionally does it turn the satirical mirror upon itself. This seems especially likely to happen during times of peak production. Such was the case, as we have seen, with *Otra revista*, in the early 1890s, when the stormy sociopolitical climate provoked an early onslaught of political *revistas*. In the 1930s, Argentina entered a similar period. In 1930, Bernardo de Yrigoyen's second presidency was cut short by a popularly approved military coup led by José Félix Uriburu. However, the general hope that a change in administration would quickly reverse the economic downturn provoked by the onset of the Great Depression proved false. Instead the country was left with a repressive regime that mainly favored the interests of the landed oligarchy and foreign investors, and which kept itself in power for thirteen years through electoral fraud as well as through the outright proscription of its chief competitor, the Unión Cívica Radical.

This period of autocratic government severely limited access to political representation for the middle and working classes, but it also created fertile ground for politically oriented—in the most overt sense—*revistas*, giving voice to popular frustrations. Donald Castro's 1997 article describes the re-discovery of the political *revista* during this period as a virtual opening of the floodgates:

> When one *revista* was a success, when the censors did not close the theatres down, and the theatre owners made money, a triumph for one was a signal for all to do the same thing. A trickle became a flood, so much so that one major theatre [el Teatro Buenos Aires] canceled its announced program and replaced it with the new politically motivated *revistas* and *sainetes*. (47)

The economic potential behind such sudden proliferation must have provoked both seat-of-the-pants innovation as well as an occasional tendency for opportunistic repetitiveness. I would hesitate to frame this discussion, as Castro does, in terms of value judgments—"While some *revistas* were clever, most were dreadful" (47)—but I would suggest that while formal innovation has often been thought of as a principally avant-garde affair, the shock of the new has, in modern times, become a popular pleasure as well. This might be attested to by the metatheatrical and immensely popular—though never re-edited after its initial publication—*La rebista de 2 sentavos,* written in 1933 by Ivo Pelay and Eduardo Beccar.

If the ingenuity of innovation in *revista* production ever gave way to unimaginative repetitiveness or lack of artistic inspiration, these failings may well have had to do with the difficulties associated with providing a living for the large troupe of

actors, musicians, and other personnel associated with a theatrical company. *La rebista de 2 sentabos'* satirical twist relies upon an accentuation of this economic hardship. The work sets its action in a garage-cum-makeshift theatre in the fictional, backwater burg, Cañada Melancólica, "1120 kilómetros de la Capital Federal" (6), where the company has been abandoned by its financial backer, and now, without decorations, without costumes, must improvise a production that will draw enough public to finance its trip back home. As various members of the troupe contemplate their predicament and formulate their plan for a makeshift performance, the Tiple Cómica[34] remarks with disgust "Por esa revista no doy ni dos centavos," to which the director replies "Ahí está el título: 'La revista de los dos centavos'" (7).

Only by establishing these unusual circumstances, to whose extraordinary nature the initial stage directions themselves attest—"Cañada Melancólica…un pueblo modesto que pocas veces es visitado por una compañía teatral" (3)—is the work able to establish the idea of an ingenuous public who will be effectively duped by the spectacle, which despite any artistic merits it may appear to have, consists principally of spectacular superficiality: "Todo es colores, luces y jazz-band" (30). In fact, despite the work's self-description, "Caricatura de un gran espectáculo porteño en un ato y tantos cuadros como el puvlico tolere" (4), a large part of its humor concerns itself not with *revista,* but with the "picturesque" customs and supposed lack of erudition in rural areas. The initial stage directions include reference to a number of signs, supposedly written by a local, to be "distribuidos por el hall" so the audience might see them as they enter the venue. These

[34] To emphasize the caricature, the *revista*'s characters receive only these generic titles: *Director, Primer Actor, Vedette, Chansonier* (sic), etc.

signs, which read, for example, “Se proibe atar los cabayos a las rejas de de la boletería; Se ruega no tirarle manises a los artista;” and “Al conosido Don Miguel (el tendero de frente a la Iglesia no se le despacha más asta que no pague la deuda que debe” (3), actually attest to the relative literacy and urbanity of the *real* audience.

Still, the work manages to communicate its central message, that the public should stay alert not only to the sociopolitical and repertorial pitfalls usually pointed out by *revista,* but also to the venality, hypocrisy and sometimes excessive conventionality of show business itself. Thus, the audience is subjected to disruption of the action by advertisements for shoe stores, butcher shops, and the like; to an episode, complete with faux French dialogue—e.g., “Ye cherché un francé de vré y lo cherché par ici” (24)—that makes fun of *revista*’s perhaps excessive fascination with the City of Light; and to various scenes pointing out the importance, for spectacular effect, of correct light*ing*, without which it is obvious the actors’ supposedly exotic costumes are actually made out of mosquito netting and pudding basins swiped from the local hotel.

Given the tense sociopolitical context of the time, probably the most curious of the implicit criticisms has to do with show business’ relationship with representatives of political and legal power. Accompanying the supposedly improvised sketches of the *revista* within the *revista, La rebista de 2 sentavos* maintains a running conversation between various of its actors and el Hijo del Comisario, who divides his time between passing aesthetic judgment on the work’s presentation and sexually harassing the Vedette. As we have seen, for example, in the case of *Otra revista* (1890), and as Castro reports concerning the 1930s, and Falikov (29) regarding the *década peronista* and the

1960s (35), politically driven censorship has played an important role at many points in Argentina's cultural history, though many today would principally associate this sort of repression with the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). The 1930s version of censorship is made palpable by *La rebista de 2 sentavos,* in which, despite the protests of the Vedette's husband, the Primer Actor, and those of other members of the troupe, the Hijo's presence is generally tolerated as a necessary evil.

But the official meddling goes even further. Another character who makes appearances throughout the course of the work is the Aspirante, at first, apparently a rustic with dreams of making it in the big city. He pesters the Director to allow him to perform in the *revista*, and his renditions of "El drama de Facundo" (9) and of "un poema clásico en 42 capítulos" provide some of the work's most comic material. However, at the *revista's* end the audience discovers that the Aspirante is really the Comisario himself. Thus, the entire production has in various ways been manipulated by representatives of state power, and the Director's eventual acceptance of the Comisario's offer to fund the troupe's return to Buenos Aires amounts to an implicit acceptance of these intrusions.

I still hesitate to agree with Mauro's description of the genre in general as being generally "complicit" with repressive politics, but Pelay's edgy spectacle serves to ward off any tendencies to take for granted the "rebellious" nature of any work calling itself a *revista*. The figure of the Comisario, who as it turns out has had a long career as an actor, alerts us to official power's own capacity for histrionics. After revealing his identity, this functionary says "Yo he sido cómico toda mi vida, y cómico de los buenos" (27).

However, one's definition of a "good comedian" may depend upon one's relationship with the power structure, and those who would defend *revista*'s capacity for challenging official discourse would probably agree with the Primer Actor's assessment of the Comisario's little joke: "Pues le advierto que no ha tenido ninguna gracia" (28). Pelay's and Beccar's idea of "ha ha funny" does not seem to include the hegemonic pranks perpetrated by those who use their power and influence to alter artistic expression.

CONCLUSIONS—GAMBETEANDO[35] EL *HABITUS* Y EL REPERTORIO

The massiveness of *revista's* appeal, attested to by Castro, Prestigiacomo, and others, must be explained in terms of its relationship to the prevailing sociopolitical climate. Despite the relative macroeconomic successes of the 1930s, which to some extent allowed Argentina to sidestep the pitfalls of the Great Depression, the middle classes, described by Marco et al. as intimately linked to the development of *género chico,* experienced this period as a dashing of hopes for political and social agency. Just as would happen repeatedly during the 20th century—notably, 1966-1973, and 1976-1983—systemic control was wrested from their hands and put into those of the military,

[35] This term, meaning "to sidestep or dodge," is often used by commentators of soccer, a sport that, like *revista,* arrived from Europe around the end of the 19th century and quickly became an expression of native Argentinian identity.

at the service of an oligarchy that in many ways did not differ much from the one controlling the country between 1880-1916.[36]

Is it any wonder, then, that during the 1930s "the genre of *teatro de revistas* was gaining popularity over the fading *sainete porteño*" (Castro 45)? The *sainete*, with its way of "working through" social issues and tendency to end in a way that Versteeg (319) describes as wrapping things up "como Dios manda," may have begun to strike disillusioned audiences as unrealistically optimistic. *Revista,* meanwhile, allowed them to laugh without suppressing their own hard-earned skepticism. Also, the improvisational quality of *revista,* its emphasis on critical observation of repertoire / *habitus*, and its resistance to cooptation by disciplining discourse, may have encouraged the development of a kind of adaptability that, as the century advanced, would become more and more important for survival in an increasingly volatile sociopolitical climate.

I have already noted the difficulty of locating *revista* scripts produced before the 1940s. Due in part to intellectual hostility— "la *intelligentsia* sólo se preocupaba por conservar las obras que contribuían a formar la mitología nacional" (Marco et al. 23)— and the attitudes of the producers themselves, who concerned themselves primarily with the creation of "obras perecedoras, escritas para un empleo inmediato y para un más inmediato consumo" (Marco et al. 254), this lack of documentation seems to have worsened over time. While *revistas* continued to be performed throughout the 20th century, and still maintain a certain admittedly diminished presence in the Buenos Aires

[36] Consider, for example, that president (1922-1928) Marcelo T. de Alvear's second-in-command was none other than Julio Argentina Roca, *hijo*, whose father had been the most powerful political figure of the *República Conservadora*.

of today, it is virtually impossible to locate texts for works produced after the *década infame*.

Nevertheless, just like extra-theatrical performances of the past century—e.g., those performed by the authoritarian militarist, the populist politician, the socialist, the foreign investor, the oligarch, the academic, and so on—the performance of *revista* has endured in extra-scriptural form, and tends to continually find new stages upon which to present itself. Its objective, to reveal the despotic discourses behind the reflexive performance of various social functions—including that of show business, and even comedy itself—has remained virtually the same, and its achievement of this objective still relies upon a "carefully cultivated degree of estrangement," as well as upon an openness to improvisation.

Though televised sketch in Argentina is filtered through a medium with undeniable connections to such hegemonic elements as big capital and cultural imperialism, it remains, paradoxically, an "embodied cultural practice" essentially directed toward the resistance of established *habitus* and repertoire. As such, this cultural practice should provide a compelling object of analysis, not only for the Argentinian cultural historian, but for scholars / laypeople of any nationality who concur with Paul Gilroy's emphasis on the current need to recognize and perhaps even cultivate diversity within sameness.

Returning to the late 20th century, let us reconsider in this light the sketch "Vamos a un parque," essentially a monologue—reminiscent of the "sketch monologues" popularized by radio performers like Niní Marshall—in which Capusotto addresses the

viewer directly. His performance here, expressive of a feeling of *dépaysement* relative to specific special interest groups common to many Western cities of the 1990s, seems to capture the very essence of *revista*. Besides Capusotto's general method of artistic creation, which involves free improvisation in the presence of writers with whom he then collaborates in order to solidify the sketches,[37] it is important to note his adoption of the foreign persona (Siddharta Kiwi). This character's outsider status, like that of Momus, or indeed like that of the often nonnative diegetic observers in Argentinian *revista,* places him at an objective distance from certain everyday performances—the skinheads, the feminists, the evangelical Christians—whose existence tends not to be questioned, or perhaps not even noticed, by the average urbanite making his way through the crowds on his way to or from work. Thus, there is also an implicit criticism of the quotidian experience of the city streets as nothing but the space between a point of departure and a destination. Finally, like *Otra revista* and *La rebista de 2 sentavos*, the satire here also encompasses show business. Though "Vamos a un parque" does not reflect upon comedy shows themselves, one could certainly see in it a certain burlesque take on New Age spiritual programming's[38] tendency to favor development of inner spiritual peace over the taking of direct action to resolve social problems.

Siddharta Kiwi represents not just an ingeniously improvised take on a particular moment in the 1990s, but the continuation of a centuries-old cultural practice encouraging us to extract ourselves from whatever disciplining discourse happens to be

[37] Other television performers, perhaps most notably Alberto Olmedo, incorporate improvisation into the performance as well as the writing stage.
[38] A recent example: Claudio María Domínguez' sententious *Hacete cargo* (2011-2013).

repeating itself in our brains at the moment, return to our bodies, and reactivate the liveliness of our capacity for perception—an aptitude that, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, has perhaps proven especially valuable in the Argentinian sociopolitical climate of the last century. During this time, moreover, the Argentinian comedian has had to develop a special ability for establishing cultural authenticity while at the same time communicating with foreigners whose knowledge of local dialect and custom may be limited. Early *revista,* produced during the 1880-1930 period of massive immigration, provided an ideal laboratory for development of this skill.

However, though as we will see, many early TV comedy shows amounted to a direct translation of *revista* to the small screen, and though even some of today's programs—e.g., *Johnny Allon presenta* (1988-)—maintain a close resemblance to those early shows, Capusotto does not merely adapt *revista* wholesale to the small screen. Examination of modern television programming still leads me to believe that the Podestás' project for creation of a massive, commercial, and particularly Argentinian brand of entertainment did not go extinct in the 1930s, as a theatrical purist might assume. Rather, it metamorphosed into new mediatic formats. However, I cannot explain the cultural and mediatic significance of *Peter Capusotto y sus videos* (2007-), for example, merely as a logical extension of *circo criollo* and *revista porteña*. Instead, I will have to consider the intervening years as well. Thus, along with a few excursions into the cinematic realm, the next chapter consists of a study of early radio and television comedy.

Chapter 2—A Spectral Presence: The Survival of Sketch on Electronic Mass Media

A first, cursory glance discovers the trappings of a televised 1960s musical show. The opening, black-and-white *plan américain* captures a woman with a voluminous blond hairdo bobbing rather stiffly to a basic rock beat, beside a man in a dark suit standing with his back to the camera, all before a background of crude spherical shapes together with the program's title, *La barra de la nueva ola juvenil*, written in bold marker felt type. Were we not already put on guard by the singer's face, despite the copious makeup obviously that of a middle-aged man, and by "her" supposedly effeminate voice, the song's opening lines might corroborate our initial impression: "Que gustas de mí, me dices como un niño," she sings, accepting a Cupid's heart drawing from the anonymous male figure; "Quieres darme amor, y darme tu cariño." But then, the tone changes abruptly, as she continues, "Pero es sólo sexo; el que habla es tu falo / no creo en el amor de ningún ser humano." The rest of the song's lyrics—e.g., "El amor es un error de nuestras hormonas"—serve to justify the refrain, "Metete el cariño en el culo," and the singer drives this message home by viciously stabbing and setting fire to a wedding cake and decapitating the groom figurine that stands atop it.

As Mercedes Moglia indicates in her insightful 2013 article, the humor in this excerpt[39] from *Peter Capusotto y sus videos: un programa de rock* derives from the parodic distance between Capusotto's fictitious 1960s diva, "Violencia Rivas," and what

[39] On YouTube, "Peter Capusotto—Violencia Rivas 31-8-09" (patoraymundo, 2009).

most viewers recognize, if only intuitively, to have been the general discursive bent of television from that time—i.e., an emphasis on conformity and consumerism, and specifically regarding women, as Moglia points out, on "docilidad, castidad y modestia" (54). Here once again, Capusotto[40] deploys an effective *glocal* style. One needn't be an expert in the history of Argentinian pop culture to find this sketch amusing. At the same time, the care with which this parody, like so much of Capusotto's work, is crafted—in terms of decor, costumes, the choosing of names, camera work and so on[41]—communicates an implicit invitation to descend ever further down the rabbit hole. In the present chapter I propose to embark upon just such an adventure, concentrating on televised sketch comedy between the years 1951-1969, as well as on a few parallel cases in 1940s and 1950s radio and cinema that help to shed light upon the artistic and sociopolitical circumstances surrounding the birth of the new medium.

As we will see, during this period comedy itself experienced no immunity to the kind of discursive control satirized by Capusotto's "Violencia Rivas" sketches. Indeed, elements of humor identified in the previous chapter as conducive to anarchic liberation of mind and body from disciplining discourses were often considerably watered down, if not entirely drowned out, by the "white noise"—not only technical, but also social, political, and economic—accompanying the transition to new media. Here I refer to both corporal humor, particularly of the sort concerning what Bakhtin denominates the "bodily lower stratum," and sociopolitical satire. To gain a global grasp of the period at hand, I

[40] In this case, together with producer / co-director Pedro Saborido.

[41] Moglia's article provides in-depth explanation of the relationship between Capusotto's fictitious *Barra* and Canal 13's *El club del clan* (1962-1964), a musical program dedicated to the fabrication of real, though ephemeral, pop stars like *Violeta* Rivas.

suggest envisioning Jesús Martín-Barbero's concept of *mediación* as a sort of pendulum hanging between a left-hand side dedicated to economic redistribution and the liberation of individuals from oppressive social schemata, and a right-hand side favoring oligarchic, patriarchic, capitalist interests. In their push toward massiveness, modern electronic media have sometimes moved in the direction of inclusivity, representing and even giving voice to a wide range of social sectors. On the other hand, in Argentina as well as in the US, these media have existed primarily as money-making enterprises, and as such have often moved in the direction of cultural homogenization favoring consumerism, bourgeois values and morals, and general support of the (capitalist) status quo.

Thus, in terms of comedy, we could describe the brief, initial days of radio in the 1920s as roughly balanced between the two sides, already further to the right than popular theatre, but somewhat counterbalanced by the experimental and as yet relatively unregulated nature of the new medium. Thenceforth, due to technical, sociopolitical, and economic factors, this medium would make a drastic swing to the right, placing severe limitations on comedic expression, including the virtual blacklisting of several artists despite the relatively mild nature of their supposed transgressions. Television's beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s involved an assimilation into this relatively repressive environment.

Throughout this interval, though, we may observe a fidelity to the prevailing tropes of *sketch* comedy as cultural practice which, I argue, reinforces key elements of Argentine national character, such as willingness to consider the foreignness of local cultural repertoire, valuing of improvisation, and resistance to accept pat formulae for

achievement of happy consciousness. As such, like other sorts of "embodied cultural practice" described by Diana Taylor, this loyalty to sketch facilitated the survival of certain local particularities despite what might at first glance appear to have been the overwhelming encroachment of an imperialistic foreign cultural industry.

Radio—Una carcajada reprimida

Various researchers, including Gallottii (1975), Sarlo (1992), and Karush (2012) have described early Argentine radio as a medium that, especially in comparison with television, allowed for a reasonably egalitarian mode of diffusion that was able to resist with some success the fetters of cultural imperialism. Reasons cited for these characteristics include the following: 1) radio's relative technical simplicity, which meant that even amateurs with a little technical education could construct their own sets and even broadcast their own signals; 2) the comparatively low cost of early receivers and of radio-related magazines such as *Radiolandia, Antena* and *Sintonía*, publications that moreover expressly backed the interests of local rather than international cultural production (cf. Calzón, 2009); and 3) the relative preponderance of small local capital, such as that invested by electronics salesman cum media magnate Jaime Yankelevich, in the development of the radio industry.

All these factors would seem likely to contribute to the creation of a favorable environment for adaptation of popular local cultural production, such as *revista*-style

humor, to the new medium. However, they were counterbalanced by technical, social, and political circumstances that tended to circumscribe the possibility of this adaptation.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the technical character of the new medium imposed a great reliance upon the written word, at the expense of both visual, physical expressivity and oral improvisation. The suggestive raising of of the eyebrows or gesture of the hands that could reveal ulterior intentions behind an otherwise innocent-sounding turn of phrase, and in fact a whole repertoire of body language probably reaching back not just to relatively recent theatrical production such as *revista* / *revue,* but to the Commedia dell'arte and beyond, were now inadvertently banished. The common practice employed by early radio casts of touring Buenos Aires *barrios* and provincial towns shows to what extent their physical presence was missed by fans of their regular, exclusively sonic work.

Then too, what *radioteatro* star Fernando Siro describes as, for him, "una cosa bárbara [de la radio]: no teníamos que memorizar la letra," (Ulanovsky et al. 212), could also be interpreted as a kind of very real, though probably unintentional, scriptural tyranny that limited the expressiveness of popular orality.[42] Again, efforts to overcome this lack point as much as anything else to the impossibility of actually doing so, as well as to the seriousness of the technical deficiency itself. For example, though they undoubtedly speak to her verbal brilliance, Niní Marshall's carefully crafted reproductions of various local dialects—complete with phonetic spellings, non-

[42] By contrast, consider, for example, the scene mentioned in Chapter 1, from *Estrellas de Buenos Aires*, which makes clear the tendency in *revista* for actors to forget or even purposefully disregard scripts, if indeed such documents were ever drafted to begin with.

hegemonic grammar, and so on—also resemble the paternalistic, if sympathetic, projects undertaken by *indigenista* writers of roughly the same period.[43]

Secondly, we should consider the social milieu surrounding the birth of radio. I have mentioned criticism's tendency to emphasize the medium's relatively popular roots. Matthew Karush in particular insists upon this point in his 2012 text, and it certainly backs up his argument, which is that mass media of the pre-Perón era did not in fact tend to erase class consciousness as had been assumed by previous scholars, but rather deepened the conceptual chasm between rich and poor, depicting the former as soulless and depraved, the latter as hard-working and magnanimous, creating in this way a sort of social vocabulary that Perón himself would come to utilize in his quest for power. Key to this facet of his argument are the figures of Max Glücksmann and Jaime Yankelevich, "pariah capitalists" of modest immigrant backgrounds, whose willingness to "seize opportunities scorned by established elites" (Karush 1232) facilitated their move into the radio business.

But even had these two remained constant representatives of popular sentiment,[44] we should recognize that they were but two, amongst a milieu that actually included a high percentage of well-to-do members of the *ciudad letrada*, as well as representatives of foreign capital. From the technical pioneers whose quasi-acrobatic maneuvers to secure antennas on rooftops earned them the nickname *los locos de la azotea,* and whom

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[43] In this sense, an essential element of Marshall's texts is the presence of a male interlocutor, who speaks with orthodox grammar and pronunciation, and who in fact often corrects the speech of Marshall's ethnically marked characters.

[44] Yankelevich, for one, would in fact become a kind of mouthpiece for Perón, who despite championing (especially during his first term) the common man, also bent to nationalistic, Catholic political influences, applying Draconian standards regarding what could and could not be said on the radio.

Ulanovsky describes as "niños bien, hijos de familias acomodadas" (13), to the Yankee, British, French, and German founders of Radio Sudamérica, to Harry Wesley Smith, British founder in 1935 of the technically groundbreaking Radio El Mundo, early radio leadership was populated by figures whose attitudes toward local popular culture must have ranged between ignorance and / or scorn, and sympathy qualified by a fundamental allegiance to the pocketbook.[45]

Finally, though censorship, as we have seen, was already an issue well before cultural producers began to exploit the airwaves, the move to radio resulted in a concentration of media that facilitated the bowdlerizing designs of Catholic, nominally nationalistic interests. Their attitude toward the sort of linguistic and cultural expression that had found a place in popular theatre is succinctly communicated by noted censor Miguel Paulino Tato: "conviene más callarla que difundirla" (Spinsanti). While the so-called *década infame* of the 1930s is widely recognized as a sort of starting place for state repression in the 20th century, the legal basis for radio censorship in fact extends back to Hipólito Yrigoyen's 1928 *Dirección de Radiocomunicaciones,* which published a *reglamento* calling for "audiciones altamente artísticas y culturales" (Ulanovsky 50)—a proclamation vague enough to be capitalized upon by subsequent, more aggressive proponents of government intervention.

Such sentiment was materialized in 1933 by the drafters of the National Executive Power's *Decreto 21004*, which among other measures banned *lunfardo* from the

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[45] Mastrini (2009), for example, describes a history of government / radio relations in which executives have often been all to happy to comply with limits on programming content in exchange for a marked lack of industrial regulation.

airwaves, as well as “todo contenido político o sociológico sin autorización escrita…lo que constituye la legalización de la censura previa” (Druetta, 104). This measure, signed by President Agustín Justo, would only be strengthened by Perón’s *Decreto 13.474—Manual de Instrucciones para las Estaciones de Radiodifusión*. Among its other effects, the *Manual*, “caracterizado por censura previa y restricción a la libertad de expresión” (Mastrini 48), maintained and in fact provided for stronger enforcement of the ban on *lunfardo*, requiring even that the lyrics of famous tango songs be translated into “proper” Castilian. Ulanovsky (141) mentions the “carcajada colectiva” provoked by the requisite change, for example, from “Percanta que me amuraste,” to “Señorita que me abandonaste,” or from “Yira, yira,” to “Da vuelta, da vuelta.”

However, as other forced re-renderings—e.g. from “el bulín que la barra buscaba pa’ caer por la noche a timbear,” to “mi cuartito feliz que albergaba un romance sincero de amor”[46]—indicate, these changes were often not just idiomatic, but also semantic. As such, they represented an attempt to use mass media to impose supposedly respectable middle-class values upon the general populace. God (Perón?) forbid that young people should roam about after hours, gambling and living communally, as the song’s original lyrics indicate. Instead, they should settle down—into an unthreateningly heteronormative relationship, of course—and dedicate themselves to *productive* enterprise centered upon the manufacture and consumption of goods and services. Though Perón eventually lifted the ban on *lunfardo*, the government’s overall media

[46] These lyrics come from Celedonio Flores’ “El bulín de la calle Ayacucho.”

policy remained quite restrictive in terms of content at least until the end of the last military dictatorship in 1983.

Early Conquests—the Discovery of Radio Humor

I have mentioned the social stratum from which the *locos de la azotea* emerged. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this group of young doctors and doctors-to-be, led by the multitalented Enrique Telemaco Susini, chose as the content of Argentina's very first public radio broadcast a work whose genre has been described, at least since *La revue des théâtres* (1728), as the antithesis and even the natural enemy of popular theatre: Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*, performed at the Teatro Coliseo on August 27, 1920. Granted, due to the relative economic well-being and / or technical sophistication necessary for the possession of a receiver in those times, the choice made by Susini's group may in fact have corresponded well to audience tastes. However, as the radio became ubiquitous, and especially after the incorporation of the loudspeaker in 1924,[47] a development that turned the device into a cost-effective means of entertaining groups of people gathered in public or at home, new audiences would of course require other satisfactions besides those afforded by the "sutil celaje de armonías" and the "nobles emociones" (from the newspaper *La razón,* cited by Ulanovsky 24) pertaining to Wagner's piece.

[47] Until this time, listeners had had to use headphones.

Significantly, the first piece of radio humor cited directly by Alicia Gallotti in her unique 1975 work[48] dates precisely from 1924. Both the author of this work, Florencio Parravicini, and its performer, Tomás Simari, had extensive prior experience in popular theatre, including *revista*. Parravicini in fact participated as a member of the cast of *Revista nacional,* the 1903 work I mentioned in Chapter 1 as exemplary of sketch's commitment to problematizing sexual relations, refusing to ratify current sociopolitical conditions through the portrayal of successful exchanges of women. While Parravicini's short radio piece, titled "El descubrimiento de América," concerns itself with other thematic material—i.e., the description, in a kind of Cocoliche, of Columbus' maiden voyage—it employs a similarly anti-iconic take on reality. Besides the use of what Bergson calls "reciprocal interference," here both temporal—"[Colón] pilla el tranway y se ne va a España"—and geographical—claiming that Columbus landed "frente mimo del Puerto Madero," the humor here stems from a marked willingness to engage in bodily and sexual reference and double-entendre that ranges from the anti-iconic—mispronouncing the explorer's name ("Culón") and referring to Fernando de Talavera as "un fraile que la reina le contaba so picardillas"—to the frankly blasphemous, as Columbus complains about the lack of a statue of himself in Buenos Aires: "Se la han hecho a Mazzini sobre una silla, se la han hecho a Garibaldi incima de un caballo. ¡Yo quiero que me la hagan incima de la Santa María!" (Gallotti 7-8).

Analysis of the scant remains of early programming indicate this sort of liberty of comedic expression did not extend past the early 1930s, but remained confined, as I have

[48] Like humor in popular theatre (and like televised humor), radio comedy has received very little critical attention.

indicated above, to an initial, exploratory, formally unregulated period. During these early years, radio pioneers seem to have adopted a relatively laissez-faire attitude in terms of what sort of material might be aired. For example, both Ulanovsky and Gallotti remark that in the 1920s various of the city's numerous bordellos commonly bought ad space on the radio. But by the next decade, political and entrepreneurial concern over decorum and "cleanliness" would take the bite out of popular humor, rendering unacceptable both physical, sexual reference and direct (anti-ruling party) political criticism. I have mentioned Karush's hypothesis regarding the role that 1930s and early 1940s mass media played in preparing the public for Peronism by fueling class consciousness. Without refuting this claim, I suggest that the degree to which the Argentinian public eventually acquiesced to Perón's near-totalitarian brand of populism might also reflect a general *credulity* that had just as much to do with the virtual erasure of centuries-old traditions of popular humor as with media emphasis on socioeconomic inequality.

Nevertheless, the lasting appeal of sketch's formal skeleton as common organizer of humorous radio programming points toward the continuing existence of a sort of flexibility mechanism in the cultural collective unconscious, which could adapt to and even in some cases celebrate drastic change in the political landscape, such as the eventual downfall of Perón himself, as well as the alternating periods that followed, of semi-democracy (with Peronism often proscribed) and outright authoritarianism. Gallotti describes five categories of early radio comedy programming: "1) De sketches; 2) De personages; 3) Personales; 4) Comentarios de la realidad; 5) Situacionales" (11). However, the classification she designates "personales" could also be described as

monologue sketch, as each of these programs was created for a well known personality, such as Pepe Iglesias or Luis Sandrini, who would narrate anecdotes from the points of view of various fictional characters. This technique, which we have already seen in televisual form in Capusotto's "Vamos a una plaza," with which I opened Chapter 1, has the advantages of both economizing personnel—often airing only the famous actor and an *animador*, who would serve as interlocutor—and of translating visual elements into verbal narration that could be easily communicated via the new medium.

Subdued, but Subtly Sketchy—Niní Marshall

Perhaps the most prolific and certainly one of the most popular of the personalities involved in this sort of programming was the writer / actress Marina Esther Traveso (1903-1996), a figure whose work demonstrates perfectly the presence-in-absence of popular sketch comedy that I have described as typifying the first decades of radio transmission. Traveso, who would eventually use the stage name "Niní Marshall," herself represents the kind of liminality with which we might associate radio in general—between the lettered and the unlettered, the elite and the popular. Born into a relatively well-to-do family and receiving a formal education that included study of dance, singing, and foreign language, she nevertheless married young and had a child whom she was obliged to support economically when the marriage fell through.

Her first inroads into the entertainment scene were made possible by her writing skills, as she became a regular contributor to the magazine *Sintonía* (1934-1941), a

publication dedicated to the radio industry. Once she made her way into radio performing, her knack for the scriptural would again come in handy, as she wrote most of the texts that she would later read into the microphone. Again, as Carlos Ulanovsky emphasizes in his foreword to a collection of her scripts, this skill was no accident, but rather the result of long years of education, both formal and informal: "Niní escribía muy bien porque, antes, había leído mucho" (10). However, Marshall did not ensconce herself in an ivory tower, but rather committed herself to the avowed, if often avoided, mission of the Martinfierristas, to "salir a la calle a vivirla con sue nervios y con su mentalidad de hoy" (1). Her first two characters, Cándida and Catita, immigrants of Spanish and Italian origin, respectively, not only attest to the continuation of a longstanding comedic tradition of placing foreigners in the roles of observers of native repertoire and *habitus*, but to Marshall's own habit of paying attention to mannerisms and nuances of dialect pertaining to social classes and ethnic groups different from her own. One indicator of the success of her *salidas* is the fact that "altos representantes de la cultura establecida como Jorge Luis Borges o Victoria Ocampo no entendieron el sentido de su humor" (Ulanovsky 11).

At the same time, it would also be incorrect to align Marshall in an unqualified way with the sort of mixture of bawdy, bodily humor and political irreverence that we may associate with *revista* and other early popular theatre. Indeed, in early radio we can begin to observe a trend that would later typify the first two decades of televised humor, and which consisted of *divorcing* the corporal from the intellectual / political. Thus, while Marshall's work tended to emphasize a (generally quite innocuous) brand of physical

comedy, shying away from direct political reference, other radio comics, like Pepe Arias, and later Tato Bores, would produce *comentarios de la realidad* whose humor shied away from corporal reference, focusing on sociopolitical commentary. Whether imposed by official regulation or by self-censorship, this separation effectively takes the bite out of political criticism, which under better circumstances, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 1, can stimulate corporal awareness as an antidote to disciplining discourses.

In keeping with Moglia's analysis of the period as one demanding that women appear to possess "docilidad, castidad y modestia," Marshall's brand of verbal slapstick generally avoids the sexual, letting slip only the vaguest of allusions, which if challenged could be easily defended as perfectly innocent. Anyone inclined to criticize, for example, Catita's uncertain speculation regarding how men might stuff their clothing in order to appear more physically appealing—"No en los mismos sitios que las mujeres, pero…¿en las hombreras?" (Marshall 24)[49]—could always be accused of being more prurient than the author herself. Other "bodily lower stratum" humor, such as the scatological variety, seems to receive a little more latitude. When Catita takes her little brothers to see the movie *Hamlet,* King Hamlet's specter scares them so badly that they suffer from digestive discomposure; "A Mingo le agarró una coliti, una coliti, que tuvieron que hacerle una trasfusión de mier… ¡No! Parensén, Esto fue el martes. Y el miércoles le hicieron la trasfusión" (49). The scatological even gets into blasphemous territory in Catita's habitual reference to canine excreta as "sacramento de perro" (41).

[49] Most of Marshall's work analyzed here comes from her posthumous publication, *Niní, Catita y Cándida* (2013), a book that includes various sketches written for the radio. While most of her audio material that can be found on the internet was recorded in the 1960s, the texts in this book, because of their reference to Carlos Ginés as interlocutor, appear to date from the early 1940s.

However, the fundamental intensity of these examples does not typify the bulk of Marshall's corporal humor, which tends to exploit less controversial devices, such as simply calling attention to the existence of the (unsexualized) body in contexts wherein this corporeality would generally be ignored. For instance, the sketch "Hamlet" subverts our general assumption that actors should sacrifice physical comfort, if need be, to maintain the integrity of their characters, when Catita, who has dressed up to play the part of Gertrude in a neighborhood rendition of the play, admits that her costume is "todo de época; menos los pieses, porque me lastiman… Yo, con mis zapatos de corcho" (47-48).

While physical humor in Marshall's work tends toward the anodyne, political satire is almost entirely absent. Even in a sketch like "Catita emite su voto," which would seem to afford a great deal of opportunity for political commentary, the bulk of the humor derives from Catita's ignorance regarding the official procedures at a polling place, and not from the extra-official fraudulent practices that were all too common during elections of the time. Catita's description of the ballot box as "el cajón de lustrabotas ese" (25) could be taken as a guarded expression of anarchist sentiment, but could also be defended as a reasonable comparison from someone who had never before seen the item in question.

So how can we explain, then, the fact that this innocuously earthy and—apparently—politically unthreatening comedienne would become, beginning in 1943, the victim of official censorship that would eventually cause her self-exile? As Ulanovsky reports, the immediate reason given for this suppression by the Secretary of Culture under the new de facto government led by generals Ramírez and Farrell, was that some of

Marshall's characters "deformaban el lenguaje, tergiversaban el correcto idioma e influían en el pueblo, que no tiene capacidad de discernir" (139). Marshall herself was quick to point out the inanity of this charge, especially given the constant presence in her programs of a male interlocutor who spoke correctly, according to the hegemonic standard, and who would even often correct the grammar and usage of Marshall's ethnically and socioeconomically marked characters.

However, the censors held firm, and did not take kindly to Marshall's ingenious new style of fun-poking, which involved "killing" Catita, then resurrecting her with a new persona now speaking in just the sort of way that a pretentious paternalist might deem "altamente artístico": "Incorporéme en el féretro, ante la estupefacción colectiva, bajéme del catafalco cual visión fantasmagórica y reintegré al orbe de los vivos, cual crisálida que deja el capullo y se torna mariposa para revoltear de flor en flor" (140). The resulting ban on her radiophonic presence caused her to leave the country, first for Montevideo and then for Mexico, in search of work.

In any event, the initial reaction of the Secretary of Culture may strike us as an isolated case, due perhaps to some personal grudge whose basis never came to light. Stranger, and possibly more difficult to explain, is the *renewal* of this ban on Niní Marshall in 1950, during the presidency of Juan Domingo Perón, a president who explicitly marketed himself as a champion of the popular classes. Karush reports that the official reason for this re-blacklisting was an accusation that Mashall had "caricatured Evita in private" (3590). While it sounds like a smoke screen, this charge may in fact

point to the real motive behind the government's actions, which I hypothesize to have been three-fold.

In the first place, we should consider how the sort of characters that Marshall created might have challenged the media's status quo regarding the behavior of women. Though Perón gave women the vote and took other measures to advance their political liberty, the institutionally projected image of feminine virtue remained quite conservative. For example, in her analysis of children's textbooks produced during the *Peronato*, Monica Rein comments that, besides containing unabashed pro-Perón propaganda, these books invariably portrayed women as "mothers caring for their children, their workplace usually the home, and their business the family" (82). Peronist propaganda appears to have come mixed with a prescribed feminine *habitus* similar to the one described by Pierre Bourdieu in *La domination masculine*—i.e., a mode of behavior defined by diffidence and confinement to the private sphere. Marshall's female characters in and of themselves do not conform to this model, but instead display characteristics such as aggressiveness, garrulity, and chauvinism. Furthermore, the narratives within which these characters are presented call attention to the fact that their protagonists' transgressions are not willful, but are in fact the logical result of pertaining to certain urban socioeconomic groups. Because of this group status, for example, Cándida must work alongside her husband, the doorman Jesús, to maintain the building in which they live. Her "unseemly" physicality is in large part due to a lifetime of manual labor. Likewise, the demureness of the privileged strata would hardly do Catita any good when she has to defend herself against strange men trying to grope her in the

movie theater, as occurs in the radio sketch “Hamlet.” These and other of Marshall’s characters reveal a facet of the popular classes that the *Peronato* seems to have been bent upon ignoring, if not entirely suppressing. Perón’s beloved *descamisados* were worthy of being championed only insofar as they could be imagined as prudish paragons of middle-class respectability.

Secondly, it is important to note how Marshall’s own status as prominent professional may have rubbed some officials wrong, including the notoriously ambitious first lady. While the comedienne herself famously declared that she based Cándida’s character on observations of one of her mother’s Spanish maids, Abel Posadas (1993) rightly notes that Marshall’s creations generally synthesize characteristics of many different people. Regarding Catita’s style of speech, for example, Posadas writes that no single member of the petite bourgeoisie of the time, “aunque se lo propusiera, podría lograr una sintaxis tan a contramano” (50). The hyperbole inherent to Marshall’s amalgamations meant that the popular classes themselves were among Marshall’s biggest fans; though widely recognizable, her characters were unlikely to cause any individual to feel personally mocked or censured.[50] This combination of tact and humor could only be achieved by an imminently *public* professional who had amassed great quantities of observational data through regular exposure to what the entertainer herself called “las realidades educacionales que la calle mostraba a diario” (Narváez 207). However, as revealed by Monica Rein’s analysis of the textbooks of the time, the regime’s imaginary

[50] Karush argues that the masses identified principally with “Catita’s unapologetic class pride” (2441), but this sounds rather like a denial of the average listener’s capacity for reflexivity; it is perfectly possible to enjoy the lampooning of some *facet* of one’s self—hence, for example, in the United States, Jeff Foxworthy’s rural redneck following, and *Portlandia*’s popularity among effete Gen X-ers.

really only left space for one public woman, this being María Eva Duarte de Perón, who in her role as "spiritual mother of the nation" (81) performed the same duties, on a national level, that other Argentinian women were expected to carry out at home.

Ostensibly, Marshall's 1950 banishment from the workplace occurred due to personal issues involving Evita herself, who at the time was responsible for the rationing of unexposed film,[51] and who determined that Argentina Sono Film should receive its allotment only upon condition of canceling Marshall's contracts. Hypotheses regarding amorous jealousies involving the president (cf. Narváez 197-198) are not without romantic appeal, but their evidence is flimsy at best. Once again, I suggest the solution to this mystery may lie in the only confirmed accusation levied against Marshall by the Peróns. After the incident with Sono, she went to the Casa Rosada hoping in vain to plead her case with the president himself, receiving her only reply from "el secretario de un secretario" (sent forth by Juan Duarte, Evita's brother and the president's personal secretary) who came into the crowded antechamber where she was waiting and said, quite loudly so that all could hear, "Señora, dice el señor Duarte que se acuerde cuando en una fiesta de pitucos, vestida de prostituta imitó a su hermana" (Santos 69). The accusation, later vigorously denied by Marshall, nevertheless makes reference to her profession (*and* avocation) and it is herein that the truth of the matter may lie.

Perhaps Niní Marshall, the renowned comedienne, was simply too sketchy for the Peróns. Here, I deploy both the formal and the informal meanings of this word, as well

[51] U.S. exports of this resource had been drastically reduced in a deliberate attempt to dismantle Argentina's once-vibrant film industry, as part of the punishment meted out to the latter country for its reluctance to join the Allied war effort.

as, of course, my personal acceptation, "of or related to sketch comedy." Informally, Marshall was for the Peróns an "undesirable person" because of her connection to a comic practice which, despite or perhaps partially because of its strong roots in popular tradition, maintains an archival presence that may be described, formally and at best, as "not thorough or detailed." By no means do I imply that anyone in the regime's administration would have been able to explain the connection—ergo the trumped-up accusation. Still, the continued, embodied—or vocalized, in the case of its radiophonic variety—presence of this basically anarchic form of cultural production may have caused feelings of unease in an administration that placed so much importance upon the serious, near-religious faith of its acolytes.[52] Marshall's immense popularity—Gallotti describes her shows as "el primer gran triunfo" (19) of early 1940s radio—almost certainly had to do with her adaption of this tradition to radio at a time when sketch's former primary vehicle, the *teatro de revistas,* was tellingly suppressed.[53]

How did she accomplish this transmediation? Let us consider her professional surroundings, which soon after her entry into radio, broadened out into the big screen as well. We can reasonably assume the powers of observation and assimilation so essential to her development of characters were not only exercised by "la educación de la calle," but were also turned upon her new vocational environment, whose population, especially regarding her cinema contacts, looks like a veritable who's who of the *revista* scene.

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[52] By contrast, the *década infame,* which witnessed what Donald Castro has called the apogee of *teatro de revista*, was dominated by politicians who depended primarily upon bad, old-fashioned military might, economic power, and election fraud, rather than upon any grand scheme of corporatist allegiance.
[53] See, for example, Pelletieri (2005): "Durante el primer gobierno de Perón disminuyó notoriamente el número de espectáculos revisteriles" (472).

Amongst the actors she regularly worked with, just to name a few, we find Libertad Lamarque, Pedro Quartucci, Tito Lusiardi, Pablo Palitos, Juan Carlos Thorry, and Alita Román. Also, Manuel Romero, Luis César Amadori, and Luis Bayón Herrera, the three directors responsible for almost the totality of the 21 movies she made between 1938 and 1949, all had extensive prior experience in *revista*. Her time spent with these artists and others, all adepts in the practice of sketch, must have caused her to solidify any tendencies she already had in this direction due to prior exposure to popular culture. Thus, her adaptation of the action-to-narration strategy, which already existed in prototypical form—see, for example, the monologue by Parravicini mentioned at the beginning of this section on radio—as well as of various other characteristics describing this cultural practice that we have explored in Chapter 1.

Firstly, as I have already suggested, her portrayal of female characters resembles that of earlier works like *Revista nacional* and *Ensalada criolla* in that it exposes certain realities, such as the fact that many women work outside the home, are apt to have and express sexual feelings, and have no problem speaking up and communicating themselves in general. While lacking the raunchy humor of some of her *revista* predecessors, Catita's expectation, expressed in "Catita emite su voto," that the voting process should involve the physical parading forth of candidates, so as to be able to vote for "el más buen mozo," (23) certainly defies standards of feminine behavior involving *castidad, docilidad y modestia*. Also, as in most of the theatre discussed in Chapter 1, mixed gender romance in Marshall's work rarely results in marriage, and any depiction of married couples tends not to glorify the institution. The radio sketch "¿Jesús está loco?"

for example, consists mainly of Cándida's matter-of-fact description of her husband's various attempts at murdering her.

Secondly, her focus on *immigrant* characters allows Marshall to continue to establish continuity with Argentinian *revista*'s tradition of the foreign diegetic observer. As in those earlier works, the local-as-foreign viewpoint allows her to de-automatize perceptions of common Buenos Aires sociocultural phenomena, from election proceedings, to telephone conversations, to doctor appointments and museum visits. Importantly now though, Marshall's characters' alienness often proceeds not only from their national origins, but from their status as new participants in cultural practices previously belonging only to the middle and upper classes. No doubt, part of the humor of the sketch "Concierto," for example, derives from Catita's ignorance of social codes associated with attendance of a classical music concert; on the other hand, even some regular concert-goers must have experienced anamnesis of long-repressed feelings upon discovering they identified with Catita's frustration at the stuffiness of the environment and shared her hopes that something more "espetacular" would occur there, such as a pedestrian grabbing a motorcycle and fleeing the scene—as suggested by the title of the musical program's last piece, "Andante con moto y fuga" (Marshall 76).

This kind of buffoonery must have proven difficult to accept for the first *Peronato* (1946-52), bent as this administration was upon using temporary economic redistribution to foil advocates of deep structural change and ensure capitalism's continuation—a scheme that depended upon enticing the popular classes to both literally and figuratively *buy into* middle-class lifestyles. The shifting of economic resources to workers, which as

Daniel James (1988) informs us was accomplished in large part by putting a very *temporary* squeeze on the landed oligarchy, would have no effect if the newly affluent Argentinians refused to support Argentina's nascent light industry by consuming. The media, along with the ever more institutionalized and governmentally co-opted labor unions through which the largesse was often distributed, were amongst the most important tools for accomplishing this maneuver. Whether Perón and the Duartes were right to mistrust it or not, Marshall's brand of humor may have seemed threatening because of its potential to provoke some degree of doubt as to the value of the happy consciousness offered by the consumerist lifestyle.

In her tacit defense of the romantic jealousy hypothesis, Patricia Narváez cites the fact that Perón lifted the ban on Marshall shortly after the death of Evita in 1952. Without discarding the possibility of overdetermination, we should also note that the comedienne's prohibition ended during Perón's second term, a period whose politics are described by Rock as "a complete reversal of earlier policies" (307). An important part of the new five-year plan was a wave of privatization which included the turning over to the private sector, in 1953, of three out of the four new radio networks.[54] Although he certainly did not renounce the propaganda effort, Perón may have begun to suffer some doubt as to the wiseness of continuing to micromanage the media as he had done during his first presidency. Though many cite the president's unofficial annulment of the proscription of *lunfardo* during a 1949 meeting with several famous *tango* writers, Enrique Fraga (2006) reports that this ban continued to be exercised, though more

[54] Naturally, the licenses were granted to dyed-in-the-wool Peronists.

sporadically than before, for several more years, due to "la falta de una norma inmediata que contradijera a las anteriores" (24). Thus, Perón avoided alienating influential stars like his fervent supporter and eminent tango composer Enrique Santos Discépolo, at the same time holding true to his first-term commitment—overtly moral, covertly economic, I argue—to sanitizing the airwaves.

Early Television's Domesticated Revista

Commenting upon the prospect of televised comedy, one early entrepreneur made the comment, "tenemos que llevar el Maipo[55] a las casas" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 36). Had this laudable if naive objective been achieved in the first years of Argentine television, some real-life version of Capusotto's Violencia Rivas might have emerged. However, though the *format* of *revista* certainly did carry over to television,[56] its content, even in the first decade of Argentine TV, was watered down significantly, and audiences would have to wait until the 1970s before they would see anything as politically impactful, or even as risqué, as the 1898 *revista, Ensalada criolla*.

First, we should take into account certain factors surrounding the relationship between the media and the government that I have already discussed with regard to radio, and which we can assume to have held true also in the case of television. Most likely,

[55] The Teatro Maipo has been a refuge for popular theatre since 1922. By the 1950s the theatre's name was synonymous with *teatro de revista*, and this sort of spectacle can still be witnessed here today.
[56] Moglia describes early comedy programming in the following manner: "Estos programas reproducían el formato teatral de la revista criolla, de manera que el formato combinaba shows musicales, sketches cómicos que daban lugar a monólogos o chistes" (6).

government control was in fact exacerbated in the case of the small screen. Unlike radio, the new medium, inaugurated on October 17, 1951, as part of—and reproducer of—the official celebration of *el Día de la Lealtad Peronista*, had no history of independence prior to government ownership. Its overseer, Jaime Yankelevich, had already proven himself to Perón by selling Radio Belgrano at a bargain price and then agreeing to continue on as government-appointed director of the station he used to own. Also, while by 1957 there were 50 radio stations (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 240), state-run Canal 7 would remain the only television channel until the early 1960s. This must have facilitated vigilance extraordinarily.

Secondly, at least in terms of their social positions, television's early audiences resembled their radio counterparts of the 1920s who tuned in to hear Susini's transmission of *Parsifal;* however, the upper-crust nature of audiences lasted for longer than it did with radio, as the cost of televisions remained relatively exorbitant for some time. Varela (2005) comments that even in films of the 1960s the on-set presence of a TV was often used to signal the upper-class origins of the characters depicted there, and that early television's technical precariousness meant the apparatus was often bought more for the sake of novelty and conspicuous consumerism than for the doubtful entertainment value of watching blurry figures flitting across the black-and-white screen.

Finally, anecdotal evidence seems also to back up the conclusion that this domestic Maipo must have been PG- or even G-rated from the very beginning. Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén (5) mention the 1951 case of "un chiste que no gustó," which almost cost TV announcer Guillermo Brizuela Méndez his job because the current

Minister of Communications found it so offensive. The joke merits transcription, not so much for its hilarity as for what it demonstrates regarding the prudishness of the officials in charge:

> En un cine de pueblo del interior, una señora y su pequeño hijo salen en el momento del intervalo. El acomodador le entrega una sola contraseña y la mujer, preocupada, le avisa que son dos. "—No se preocupe, señora, que yo se lo voy a reconocer." "—Muchas gracias. La verdad es que usted es mucho más amable que el padre."

The official reaction to this groaner that would hardly have elicited the batting of an eye in popular theatre recalls the *Peronato's* and subsequent regimes' obsession with "docilidad, castidad y modestia." Regardless, Canal 7 likely avoided many confrontations with government officials by employing in-house censors—so-called "asesores literarios"—whose tastes ran more to classical theatre—e.g., Fernando de Rojas[57] and Thornton Wilder (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 81)—than to its popular cousin. Though as we will see, the appeal of popular cultural practice guarded it against wholesale omission, on early TV it tended to survive as a formal, skeletal entity, reminiscent of Niní Marshall's adaptation of sketch to the radio. Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén (9) describe the performances of two early TV comediennes in the following way: "Los chistes que se animaban a contar Margarita Padín y Sofía Bozán eran los del teatro de revistas, *pero en plan recatado"* (italics mine). Meanwhile, as for televised political

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[57] Admittedly, *La Celestina,* produced by Canal 7 in 1956, contains some rather racy material. Probably, the archaic language and setting provided a distancing effect similar to that achieved by the *Frenchness* of the *Folies Bergère*'s nudes, enthusiastically applauded in 1954 by the same "polite" Buenos Aires audiences who would later turn up their noses at early attempts to adapt this element to the *revista porteña*.

humor, it simply did not exist on Perón's watch; the first such program, *Caballeros de la junta redonda,* aired briefly in 1958 before being nixed by the leaders of the so-called *Revolución Libertadora*.

The Glimmer of Things to Come: **Estrellas de Buenos Aires**

Despite its more than likely diluted content, 1950s television comedy in Argentina remains a tantalizing subject for the scholar, and the lack of primary works is truly a shame. Here, after all, was an opportunity for the comedian to broadcast humor not only in verbalized fashion, as on the radio, but using as a basis for innovation the tradition of physical performance inherited from many generations of cultural practice, some of which in fact perfected their styles during times when the use of spoken language in popular theatre was expressly forbidden. Indeed, the names involved in the formation of this first wave of TV comics suggest a marked continuity of earlier cultural practice. For example, both women whose cautious quips I mentioned in the last section had extensive experience in the circus as well as in *teatro de revista*. Sofía Bozán in fact had become so iconic in the latter profession that she was known as "el alma del Maipo" (Gobello 50). Bozán and Padín typify, to some extent, the early TV comedian. A cursory check of the thirty-plus comic actors mentioned in Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén's account of the first decade of TV history shows that nearly half of them had experience in *revista,* and many also had circus roots. By no means were these artists mere holdovers playing supporting roles to newer stars emerging from the broadcasting media. The 1959 winners

of the first Martín Fierro[58] awards for the best comic actors demonstrate this point; Dringue Farías, a direct descendant of the Podestás, had extensive prior experience in both circus and *revista,* as did the female winner, Sofía's cousin Olinda Bozán, who was married to none other than Pablo Podestá.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that many early comedy programs appear to have preserved the formal aspects, at least (sketch interspersed with music, dance, and monologue) of *revista*. Among the first of these programs was Óscar Orzabal Quintana's *Tropicana Club* (1952), which cashed in on the mambo craze. According to Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén, this show's mixture of "el clima de la boîte, del night club y del teatro de revistas," utilized a "fórmula que marcó para siempre a la televisión nacional" (36). Most likely, for audiences, the domestic recalling of familiar, more piquant spectacles counterbalanced to some extent the dilution of content in this most newly mediated version. If the program could keep people home after dark, its hint of scandal could be tolerated, as the evocative format would thus essentially facilitate the real-life transformation of Celedonio Flores' "bulín de la calle Ayacucho," populated by musicians, gamblers and other denizens of the night, into "mi cuartito feliz," inhabited by monogamous, hardworking and hard-consuming, heteronormative couples.

The lack of physical record makes it difficult to determine to what extent the executors of works like *Tropicana Club, Telesolfas musicales* (1952), *La familia Gesa se divierte* (1957), and *La revista de los viernes* (1959) succeeded in transporting the spirit of popular humor, and not just its format, onto the small screen. One way to make some

[58] Argentinian equivalent of the Emmy.

educated speculation in this regard is to consider similar cinematic comedy of the same period, though we should of course acknowledge the differences between the two media. Though cinema and television today look increasingly more alike, such was not the case in the 1950s. While most TV shows of the time were transmitted live, movies of course employed film editing. This technical advantage could potentially diminish cinematic *revista*'s improvisational value—a quality that may have shown through quite clearly on early TV. The small screen's heavy segmentation and rapid transitions must have seemed quite natural to the producers of popular theatre, while cinema's capacity for polish minimizes the excitement of acts designed to encourage spontaneous communication with live audiences.[59] Thus, in *películas revisteriles y/o circenses,* like *Luces de Buenos Aires* (1931)*, El diablo con faldas* (1938),*Yo quiero ser bataclana* (1941), and *La cabalgata del circo* (1945), one tends to remember details pertaining to overall plot development rather than to the performances-within-the-performances.

For this very same reason, the rarely referenced low budget film *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* (1956) turns out to be a kind of fantasy flick for the student of popular humor interested in speculating as to the character of the period's TV comedy. A comment from the magazine *Crítica* describing *Estrellas'* director's project might just as well have been written about some of those early television shows: "Kurt Land ha cumplido la simple tarea de filmar el espectáculo teatral en su propio medio, prescindiendo de los recursos reales del cine." *Estrellas'* nearly direct translation to the

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[59] TV has of course often encouraged this spirit of interaction by inviting audiences into its studios.

screen of a typically fragmented *revista*[60] with scant overarching plot must hold certain resemblances to the seat-of-the-pants adaptations attempted by 1950s television. Unlike in other works of its type, *Estrellas' revista* appears in its entirety, and the movie's negligible plot, which develops a romantic interest between a theatre director's son and Angelita, the neophyte *bataclana* who eventually decides to marry him instead of pursuing her artistic aspirations, takes a back seat to the realization of the interior works' various acts. Analysis of these scenes thus not only promises to supply important documentary information regarding the character of a sort of generally unarchived, commercial theatre that was at the time on the verge of losing its capacity to attract large popular audiences; we also stand to gain some insight regarding how this cultural practice was not in fact dying, but was transforming itself into screenic forms that, ironically, would end up being largely televisual, not cinematic. A glance at the all-star cast list confirms this connection to the small screen. Most of these actors, including Juan Verdaguer, Elena Lucena, Don Pelele, and Alfredo Barbieri, had already made a name for themselves in *revista*, and in the years to come would supplement their continued efforts in theatre with television work.

An initial parsing of the acts pertaining to the theatrical work depicted by *Estrellas* confirms the statement I made in Chapter 1 regarding *revista's* relatively streamlined format as compared to other types of popular theatre such as vaudeville and music hall. Here there are no dancing dogs, magicians, Pétomanes, jugglers, ventriloquists, wrestlers, equilibrists, knife throwers, equines savant, or fortune tellers,

[60] The work-within-the-work contains about twenty "acts," which include *cortinas* and other monologue, song and dance, and sketches.

but only a steady alternation of song, dance, comic monologue, and sketch—the same elements that would in one way or another find their way into virtually all of the most popular televised comedy programs of the following four decades. Instead of emulating more omnibus-type productions, the adoption of the *revista* model helped to keep payrolls manageable. Also, to draw audiences, the new medium needed simple, easily recognizable formats, and the *revista* model supplied just that.

Besides testifying to the continuation of the mambo craze, *Estrellas'* dance-and-music routines also tend to confirm my suspicions regarding the watering-down of screenic *revista* performances. The striptease, though built up by announcer Juan Verdaguer[61]—"Lo que todos Uds. estaban esperando. Una chica sale vestida y cuando aplaude el público se quita un poco de ropa. Cuanto más aplaude el público, más ropa se quita."—ends up revealing only a young woman attired in a costume that today would look positively frumpy, not just at a burlesque show, but even at a beach or public pool. Meanwhile, Thelma del Río's role in this movie takes on symbolic dimensions when one considers that, in real life (or at least real theatre) she was the first Argentinian actress who, inspired by the 1955 visit to Buenos Aires of the Lido de Paris, elected to disrobe completely for a *revista porteña* performance. In *Estrellas*, by contrast, she plays the innocent Angelita, constantly chaperoned and hounded by her mother who insists that she not "salir desnuda"—even though, of course, no one actually gets naked at any point during the spectacle. This irony, probably not lost upon audience members knowledgeable of Buenos Aires nightlife, could be taken as oblique commentary

[61] Adding to the effect of direct theatre-to-screen translation, all the performers in the *revista*-within-the-movie go by their real names (or at least their real artistic names).

regarding the effects of massification on popular cultural production. If such an effect could be observed in the movies, it must have been even more pronounced in television, whose producers had to remain constantly aware of the possibility that "Angelita's mother" might drop in on broadcasted programming at any time.

Two of *Estrellas*' comic *cuadros* merit some attention here, as they seem to give voice to the ghosts of sketch comedy past, present, and future. The first, which we might call "Comisión Investigadora," hearkens back to the explosive old mix of sex and politics that would have its constituent elements precipitated off into separate programs during the first two decades of television. The sketch, whose set portrays an office space belonging to the *Revolución Libertadora's* General Investigatory Commission,[62] revolves around interaction between two *revista* veterans, handsome 40-something Elena Lucena, and Roberto García Ramos, who plays the Commission's director. During the course of the interrogation that develops, Lucena admits she has used her romantic connections with successively more powerful men in Perón's administration—from an office boy, to a senator, and finally to "un personaje mucho más influyente todavía"—to accumulate wealth including money, jewels, and two ranch estates in Venado Tuerto. The conversation turns *picante,* for mass media anyway, when she defends her methods for acquiring these properties, saying "son ganados con el sudor de…"—then checks herself rather sheepishly before touching her forehead, instead repeating the truncated expression: "…bueno, con sudor."

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[62] The Commission was created with the professed purpose of investigating mismanagement and other wrongdoing perpetrated by the *Peronato*.

The sketch's primary joke, as it turns out, has to do with the idea that, even in the Commission itself, the change in administration has not been accompanied by a change in procedure. After observing Ramos' official declaration that Lucena must give back all the property gained since 1943, the office's various underlings exit the premises at an unseen signal from the boss; at this point the real negotiations begin, with the diva asking the commissioner—whose occupation she describes as that of "chimentero oficial"—if they might get together when he gets off work. Un-offended, he replies favorably and the scene ends with him assuring her that he has a back-up plan in case anything goes awry: "Tengo un pasaje reservado para Montevideo."

This sketch deploys various themes that will seem familiar to the student of *revista's* countercultural or even anarchic spirit. As noted in Chapter 1, three of these themes—those of non-marital sexual relationships whose frustration often occurs due to money issues, the unsatisfactory nature of marriage, and the economic ventures of women not born into wealth—need not be interpreted as exclusively apolitical; nonetheless, their connection to politics remains inexplicit enough to allow for their reappearance, in PG-rated form, even on television in the 1960s. However, despite showing a similar preponderance in early popular humor, other elements of "Comisión Investigadora" make this sketch a rara avis amongst mass-mediated humor of the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, I refer here to the popular tradition's long-standing cynical take on politics; its refusal to take sides or to validate official ideologies; and its tendency to invoke bodily awareness as a mode of perception that emphasizes the essential equality

of all people, at the same time showing how the physical compulsions of the powerful can lead them to make decisions of dubious validity.

As I have suggested, this sort of comedy would become much rarer in the obsessively controlled media environment of TV's first two decades, when sexual content or other bodily reference, when not suppressed entirely, would often be divorced from political commentary, thereby avoiding synergistic combinations. While "Comisión Investigadora" defies mass media's contemporaneous discursive bent,[63] other elements of *Estrellas* conform to it and indeed appear to prefigure the next two decades of television comedy. Here I refer specifically to the neat corporal / political split between another sketch, performed by Pedro Quartucci and Alba Solís, and a political monologue by Pepe Arias. In the sketch, Quartucci plays a hotel guest, one Señor García, who agrees to share his two-bedroom habitation with a stranger, la Señora de Pérez (Solís), as she would otherwise have no accommodation. Once they are alone, by way of flirting she requests that he perform a variety of menial tasks such as unzipping her dress and getting up repeatedly to open and close the window. In the meantime he takes to sitting in bed and frenetically rustling a newspaper, showing what could be perceived as evidence of nervousness and sexual agitation. Finally, on his way to open the window again, he stops at her bed and takes her in his arms, asking her if she would not like, for "unos instantes," to be "la Señora de García." After her initial, requisite protest, she accedes, at which point he shoves her away, exclaiming "Entonces por qué no dejás de molestar y abrís la

[63] The risky nature of this artistic decision is confirmed by the movie itself. At the point in their conversation when Lucena designates the Commissioner's job as that of "chimentero oficial," the camera cuts to a shot of the *revista* director (Lalo Malcolm) looking on nervously, sweating profusely, and gulping down aspirin.

ventana vos; que ya me tenés cansado." The punchline thus involves undercutting the sketch's provocative display of feminine desire by showing that it is unrequited—García's agitation is only annoyance at having his solitude disturbed. Indeed, the piece's ending even seems to defend the virtues of marriage as an alliance wherein the members may interact comfortably without the awkward impasses of courtship.

As we will see, this skit's structure, in which the presence of corporal humor is counterbalanced by an ending that could at least be claimed to have been created for the purpose of driving home a moral lesson, would become standard format for televised sketch comedy of the 1960s as epitomized by the work of Pepe Biondi. Meanwhile, Pepe Arias' monologue "El último afiliado" typifies the sort of desexualized, often disembodied, political critique that would find separate televisual outlets, most famously in the work of Tato Bores. Granted, it is difficult to imagine this specific piece appearing on the television of the time.[64] Though Manrupe and Portela describe *Estrellas* as "un testimonio notable de cine antiperonista" (214) Arias' monologue (like the "Comisión Investigadora" sketch) does not take sides, and the *Revolución Libertadora* receives just as much criticism as the *Peronato*. Arias creates a character who has experienced the hard luck of being the last person to sign up as a member of the Perónist party, on June 15, 1955, the day before the opposition's air strike on the Plaza de Mayo. His lament regarding not having received a new car, as did a cousin of his when *he* signed up with

[64] Though, as I have noted, television shared certain technical aspects of production with theatre, the latter's mode of presentation, in discrete viewing places where people would congregate to witness a spectacle about which they generally already had some prior knowledge, resembles that of cinema. Television, like radio, depended upon a potentially unwitting audience, into whose very homes it stealthily crept, and television comedy's auto-censorship was thus probably even more careful than cinema's version of the same.

the party, constitutes a frank acknowledgement of the rampant graft associated with Perón's regime. On the other hand, he describes the *Revolución* as "una invasión extranjera" because of its leaders' last names ("italianos y gallegos"); Admiral Isaac Rojas is an "enano acuático" and a "cabecita negra"; all these soldiers are "muy brutos"; and despite its self-denomination the current regime expresses only a mean-spirited *revanchismo* which has in fact done away with all semblances of liberty and democracy. Arias' character's cousin has put out an ad offering to exchange his new car for an autographed portrait of Rojas, and the monologuist ends his speech saying that he plans to disguise himself before venturing out into the street in order to avoid a run-in with the law—"No sea cosa que me den 'del bueno' por el camino." In summary, while holding onto the *revista* tradition of non-allegiance and acerbic political criticism, this piece—excepting the mention of Rojas' diminutive stature—steers clear of humanizing references to political leaders' physicality.

Besides indicating how *revista* could be translated by new media, *Estrellas* also functions as a cinema director's almost nostalgic homage to an art form that depended upon spontaneity and interaction with live audiences. The camera cuts from time to time to scenes of the audience, and personalizes this crowd by focusing on various individuals—a woman from Córdoba, two reporters, a corpulent man who laughs mightily throughout and then when the show is over comments that he'd been "hoping for something else." Imperfection, though, constitutes an integral part of this movie's tribute to live performance. One of the movie's opening scenes shows the director's interruption of a final rehearsal of "Copa Cabana" before the *revista* begins. He tells the

performers they still need three or four days of rehearsal, but that nevertheless the show must go on—*la función no puede suspenderse*, a line that is repeated throughout the work. Like *revistas* discussed in Chapter 1—e.g., *Ensalada Criolla, La rebista de los dos sentavos—Estrellas'* theatrical production seems to embrace its own imperfection by not taking itself too seriously. Juan Verdaguer's *cortinas*[65] frequently capitalize upon this sentiment; "¡Qué espectáculo tenemos! ¡Qué espectáculo tenemos!" he declaims in his first monologue, and then, appearing to doubt himself, turns and opens the curtain to ask those behind it, "¿Qué espectáculo tenemos?" Later, in a dressing-room scene with Lalo Malcolm, Juan Carlos Barbieri, and Pedro Quartucci, the two actors assure the *revista* director they will study the script assiduously, but as soon as he leaves they rip this document to pieces. Watching *Estrellas*, one comes to understand how it has come to pass that there remains so little archival record of this cultural practice despite its popularity. Scripts were often fragmentary or simply nonexistent.

As I argue in Chapter 1, imperfection, orality, improvisation, and reflexivity all contribute to *revista's* capacity for creating spaces in which to question or even temporarily overturn *habitus* and repertoire imposed by disciplining discourse. Nor was this a space to be inhabited only by a select few. Like free-to-air television as described by Dominique Wolton, these theatrical productions could unite large, potentially diverse populations by giving them a common experience and a shared topic of conversation, and this function was probably just as important as the technical (im)perfection of the performance itself. In *Estrellas*, when before the opening act one of the reporters

[65] As discussed previously, this element of *revista* consists of brief monologues performed in front of a closed curtain to keep the audience entertained while scenes are changed.

expresses his skepticism aloud—"será igual que todas las revistas; cosas viejas pintadas como nuevas"—the director defends his work, replying "Claro que verán cosas vistas, ¿no? ¡Pero no olviden que es una revista re-vista![66] El título lo indica todo."

However, to a greater extent than television, popular theatre brought audiences—and performers—*physically* together as well, even sometimes blurring the lines between the two, and this, combined with improvisation, must have considerably enhanced the capacity for subversion. *Estrellas* portrays this quality perfectly when the *revista's* prompter fails to ready a certain actress in time for her mini-sketch with Verdaguer, and instead shoves in an extremely reluctant "Angelita's mother," who happens to be standing nearby. There in front of the crowd, this symbol of quotidian prudery unwittingly assists the monologuist in the telling of a *chiste verde;* however, instead of being offended by the vaguely smutty punchline, she is so delighted by the audience's applause that she has to be physically pushed offstage, just as she was initially shoved into the limelight. *Revista's* potentially anarchic effects were not just theoretical, auditory or visual, but also tactile and, one must assume, olfactory. Thus, it comes as no surprise that researchers such as Prestigiacomo and Mauro cite the heavily propagandist Perón regime as the beginning of the end for *revista* as popular cultural practice, nor that they identify the most recent dictatorship (1976-1983) as its definitive ending point. Meanwhile, *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* stands at a crossroads in Argentinian cultural production and documents a popular cultural practice on the verge of transubstantiation,

[66] That is, a popular ("much seen") *revista*.

at the same time prefiguring some of the qualities that would be displayed by new media's take on this practice.

TELEVISED SKETCH COMEDY, 1961-1975

With her book, *La televisión criolla: desde sus inicios hasta la llegada del hombre a la luna, 1951-1969* (2005), Mirta Varela has given us what remains to date one of a very few theoretically grounded histories of Argentinian television. Here, with striking imagery, she describes the television of the 1960s as a medium whose visual emphasis on *volume*—from the voluminous hairdos of divas like Mirtha Legrand, to set designs and decor emphasizing rotund shapes,[67] to constant repetition of acts of conspicuous consumption—connotes, for her, the implied promise of imminent expansion of access to middle-class lifestyles, to accompany the revolution in communications achieved by the television itself. However, she argues, in Argentina economic circumstances would not allow this promise to be realized as fully as in other countries, notably the United States.

In terms of televised comedy, the 1960s could be described as an apparently pregnant decade whose sense of promise would never quite be fulfilled. This period, which saw the advent of private television, the arrival of videotape which permitted rebroadcasting and—in rare cases—the archival preservation of programming, certainly had its fair share of comedy shows. However, whether because of self-censorship,

[67] Here, we might remember the spherical shapes used by the *Peter Capusotto* sketch discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

government intervention, or the atomizing effect of the medium itself, these programs tended to employ specialized styles of humor that would never quite achieve the anarchic robustness we have observed in early *revista* or in certain scenes of *Estrellas de Buenos Aires*. One of these styles, exemplified by the work of Tato Bores, depended upon verbal dissection of state power, though it generally shied away from direct mention of political figures. The other, epitomized by Pepe Biondi's overwhelmingly popular *Viendo a Biondi*,[68] employed circus-style slapstick with an emphasis on physical, though generally non-sexual and non-scatological, humor.

Because of my running hypothesis regarding the tendency for comedy—sketch in particular—to challenge allegiances to hegemonic institutions and discourse, my analysis of the two apparently opposite modes exemplified by Bores and Biondi will benefit from a consideration of their respective manners of engaging power. In a 1995 article, Kevin Olson argues for the adoption of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as a means by which to conceive of the changing quality of power throughout history. According to Olson, Michel Foucault's famous "claim that the body is the transhistorical object of power" (24) is easy enough to defend when it comes to the medieval body, subject to torture and other direct intervention, but harder to conceptualize in the context of our own times, when hegemonic coercion depends to a much greater extent upon symbolic and discursive factors. Here, *habitus* comes in handy, as a category that includes physical gesture and habit, but also takes into account patterns of perception and cognition.

[68] This program regularly surpassed 60 points of rating.

Had Foucault been a fan of Argentinian comedy, one could hardly have faulted him for experiencing some mystification regarding the place of the body in modern power relations. On the one hand, his viewing of Pepe Biondi would have convinced him of the veracity of his ideas regarding the medieval sociopolitical environment, and would have shown him that this environment still existed to some extent in Argentina. In *Viendo a Biondi*, the body is reified over and over again—as thief, thug, prisoner, suitor, etc.—and over and over again must suffer the consequences of this often arbitrary categorization. Meanwhile, though, Bores' rapid-fire monologues would have piqued but never satisfied his curiosity regarding how, exactly, the rather abstract decisions of political and other social elites had led to this lamentable state of affairs. While Biondi represents the reified *body* of the plebeian, Bores attempts to translate the confused *psyche* of the politician. What is lacking is a portrait of *habitus* that would take into account both the subjectification of the former and the corporal, human nature of the latter. Two factors corroborate the plausibility of the idea that Argentinian television audiences of the 1960s might have experienced some feeling of promise-to-be-fulfilled regarding the eventual arrival of this kind of depiction. First, as we have seen, such sketches had a long history of development in pre-televisual media. One very recent example, the "Comisión Investigadora" piece in *Estrellas de Buenos Aires,* clearly outlines both a subjectifying process—an attractive woman who finds that the patriarcal structure that oppresses her can nevertheless also be manipulated for personal gain—and the fleshly weakness of those in power, which both permits aforesaid subjectification and keeps government institutions from functioning in accord with their own laws and stated

objectives. Secondly, the sketch *format* formed a significant part of television programming, preserving, like Diana Taylor's "embodied cultural practice," the possibility of an eventual restoration of its prior spirit.

TATO BORES—STICKING (IT) TO IDIOCY

While Biondi's 1960s show was by far the more popular, Tato Bores' extensive career, spanning nearly fifty years, and his generally accepted status as Argentina's foremost political comedian of the latter half of the 20th century, make his mention indispensable to any historical consideration of the country's televised comedy. Nor was he entirely a stranger to sketch; besides the occasional outright deployment of this format, he also frequently made use of what I have previously defined as *monologue sketch*. This aspect of his televisual performances is one of many that point to his roots in radio, where he began his career in 1945. As various scholars have noted, despite a certain disposition for physical humor, made manifest by oversized glasses, a blond toupee, and frantic hand gestures, Bores' work depends primarily upon verbal expression. Mercedes Moglia describes how Bores adapted Pepe Arias' monologue style, speeding his delivery up to nearly auctioneer level—a modification that both facilitated his entry into time-obsessed modern media, and seemed to mirror the confounding velocity of the political developments he described. Despite this oral virtuosity, and confirming again his connection to radio, the written word remained very important to Bores; like Niní Marshall, César Bruto, Bores' writer for the show *Tato, siempre en domingo* (1961-

1970), developed an essentially literary style that allowed him to effectively parody both popular expression and hifalutin cultural practice.

The 1999 retrospective series *La Argentina de Tato,* aired on Canal 13, includes in its opening sequence a recent clip from which I shall quote the following declaration: "Si pusiéramos la máquina de cortar boludos dentro de la máquina del túnel del tiempo, y se pusiera a cortar boludos históricos con retroactividad, otra hubiera sido la historieta hoy." Besides the telling substitution of the word "historia" with "historieta," I also wish to call attention to the use of the word "boludo" here, as this imminently popular term sums up Bores' (and Bores' writers') perspectives regarding the representatives of state power; that is, their failings are attributable primarily to a lack of *intellectual* capacity. While such a proclamation certainly does not shed a positive light upon the functionaries in question, it also leaves out a whole host of other negative qualifiers—venality, classism, egotism, concupiscence, megalomania, etc.—that could be used to explain the various causes behind Argentina's—or any other country's, for that matter—sociopolitical and economic misadventures.

Though it may have reduced his impact of his criticism, the reluctance to go beyond calling attention to political *boludez* may have been one of the factors that permitted Bores to work virtually censorship-free during a half century dominated by authoritarian regimes. Other methods of evasion employed include the use of metaphor, humorous epithet, hyperbole, and especially irony. In a 1967 monologue, for example, Bores pretends to take the side of the government in his discussion of a recent decision to increase the official retirement age to 65. "Estos *jubilados*," he begins, drawing the word

out to indicate mock disapproval, and follows up with a re-description of the involved party: "estos tipos que terminan de trabajar hoy y mañana quieren cobrar la seguridad social." Then he goes on to argue that the minimum age should in fact be driven up even more, such that by the time retired people—"estos insaciables"—were able to begin collecting benefits, they would be around 100 years old. "Ya sé que no irían muchos a cobrar la jubilación, pero no me interesa; es cosa de ellos," he finishes. The mock-cruelty, reminiscent of Jonathan Swift, drives home the point while at the same time avoiding frontal assault.

Often, however, Bores could simply avoid explicit reference to policy, instead describing socioeconomic conditions whose illogicality would at any rate connote government mismanagement (with *boludez* as *its* root cause, presumably). In a 1962 clip, for example, he mounts another mock tirade, this time against Buenos Aires shopkeepers who have limited their work hours, supposedly due to lack of customers. "¡Te bajan la cortina y no te despachan nada!" he complains, and goes on to recount the story of an unnamed "friend" who made the unfortunate decision to get married on a Monday, when all the barbershops were closed. This *monologue sketch* ends with the prospective groom in an emergency room after clawing his own face to shreds out of frustration at not being able to get a proper shave and haircut before his wedding. The absurdity of this obviously fictional tale points toward an equally absurd world economic situation—and without naming names, toward the officials behind it—in which Argentina was undergoing progressive marginalization, as it ran out of the economic reserves accumulated during the Second World War. The austerity measures of the 1960s kept

political and industry leaders afloat while sinking the labor movement, but we should also acknowledge that these measures were in large part made practicable through Perón's bureaucratization of the unions—a feat achieved through lavish distribution of postwar largesse during his first presidency. Obviously, had direct confrontation been possible, Bores could have mentioned here a good number of (ir)responsible individuals. This list might range from current president Arturo Frondizi, who had adopted the same subservience to foreign capital for which he had earlier criticized Perón, to Perón himself, to military leaders by now accustomed to taking over the government whenever popular interests seemed to be gaining too much ground, to World Bank and IMF leaders, the Chicago School, etc.

Many other clips—especially the earlier ones—show a similar strategy, describing social and socioeconomic disorder to condemn *by implication*: a 1962 monologue recounting a visit to a hospital, where no services are available, but at least "todo esto es gratuito"; another, from the same year, which describes a citizen engaged in frantic buying and selling of dollars, running all over town to find the best rates, and then coming home exhausted but with a little cash, which he shows to his wife, proudly displaying the money he has made "sin hacer nada"; a 1967 piece remarking upon the curious recent disappearance of the "national musical instrument," the *bombo*, from the streets of Buenos Aires.[69]

[69] Along with saucepans, *bombos* were and are often used as noisemakers by demonstrators, but the self-proclaimed *Revolución Argentina* (1966-1973), in many ways a practice run for the even more oppressive *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (1976-1983), had made public protest a risky endeavor.

Certainly, a good part of the fun of watching Bores' programs in the 1960s and 1970s must have come from observing the skillful manner in which he eluded the censors. As Moglia (2012: 9) argues, his sly ironies, metaphors, and other wordplay may not be so easily appreciated by audiences steeped in today's media environment, where informal treatment of public figures has become commonplace. Indeed, with the arrival of a semblance of democracy in 1983, Bores began to employ multi-actor sketch with more frequency, and to refer more explicitly to specific public figures. Nevertheless, one still notes the predominance of verbal humor and emphasis on *boludez*, as in a 1991 conversation[70] with "José Vivomorfando Sapos, Secretario General del Sindicato Único de Giles[71] de la República Argentina," (SUGIRA) who has come to air some complaints regarding the current political climate. In the first place, recent developments, such as a wage freeze, as well as the gubernatorial candidacies of Ramón Saadi and Antonio Domingo Bussi,[72] are taxing even the *giles'* capacities for credulity. Secondly, the politicians who depend upon SUGIRA votes have not given the *giles* the public recognition they deserve; these officials should announce outright, he argues, "Uds. [los giles] son el pasado, el presente, y el futuro de la patria, y sin Uds. no habríamos llegado hasta donde estamos." Other than its use of sketch structure and its unflinching naming of names, this clip differs little from those of earlier years, and like much of Bores' earlier work, this piece would function equally well on radio. The jokes are entirely verbal.

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[70] The clip is from *Tato, la leyenda continúa* (Canal 13, 1991).
[71] Like *boludo*, *gil* may be translated as "moron."
[72] Saadi was in the depths of scandal since it had been discovered that two of his henchmen had murdered a young woman; Bussi was a known war criminal in his native Tucumán.

Pedro Saborido, the script writer and co-producer of *Peter Capusotto y sus videos*, has identified Bores' locus of enunciation as the midway point between the *ciudad letrada* and the general populace: "Tato era un intermediario entre la sociedad y la cúpula de poder, a la que en su ficción de cronista de la realidad tenía acceso" (Moglia 2012: 8). While his position as sociopolitical critic led him to expose the absurdity of political action, he generally fought his battles on this intermediate, essentially verbal ground, using common-sense logic to dismantle the windmills of official discourse. Though his roots in verbally dependent radio and in the obsessively controlled media environment of the 1940s-1970s explain and to some extent justify this approach, it could be argued that the very real body of the dragon—power's corrupt and all too human underbelly—was left virtually unscathed by Bores' attacks.

Pepe Biondi—The Word Made Flesh

Despite the differences in their styles, it would be inaccurate to see Pepe Biondi's work as directly antithetical to that of Bores. In fact, *Viendo a Biondi* (1961-1969), easily Argentina's most popular television program during the 1960s, to some extent portrays an *incorporation*—i.e., "corporealization"—of Bores' *monologue sketches* describing the absurdity of current social reality.

A brief discussion of sociopolitical context will help to understand the popularity of this program. Daniel James' (1988) analysis of Perón's first two presidencies and their aftermath will prove helpful in this sense. According to James, though Perón did make

significant advances in terms of economic redistribution, by viewing the period through a narrowly fiscal lens one cannot begin to understand the immensity of the change accomplished by his administration. The extension of workers' rights and privileges, including improvements in healthcare, education, wages, collective bargaining, and so on, was accompanied by a rhetorical shift that, while steering clear of the bugaboos of socialism and communism, for the first time granted workers the status of social actors and even made them feel as if their role in the national drama might be the leading one. Using language that, as Karush argues, was in large part adapted from the polarizing mass-media portrayals of class difference of the 1930s and 1940s, Perón championed the working-class *descamisados,* employing tropes from tango songs and popular melodrama to address them as virtuous nation builders, and expressing his own spiritual and psychological unity with them. Though he was a career military man and political arriviste, many workers did in fact coincide with the "Marcha Peronista's" description of him as "el primer trabajador"; thus, it seemed almost as good as having one of their own as the country's leader. This feeling of representativity applied not only to Perón himself, but to a whole hierarchy of authority, from the president's wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, to union leaders like Agustín Vandor, who would show up in shirtsleeves for meetings with government officials, extending on down to the newly empowered individual workers on the shop floor.

As James notes, this pyramid of power had already begun to crumble during Perón's second term. Ironically, to some extent due to the redistribution that had occurred, advances in light industry made during his first term could not be translated

into the kind of accumulation of capital that would allow the country to develop self-sustaining heavy industry; it thus became necessary to open the doors once again to foreign capital and to implement austerity measures that would reverse a good deal of the progress that had been made in terms of wages and benefits. Meanwhile, union leaders became divorced from their activist roots and accustomed to the good life, and the unions themselves could now be used to subjugate workers just as easily as they had previously been utilized to empower them. The result: reversal of the expansion of rights and privileges and the feeling of equality promoted by Perón's brand of corporatism, and a return to the use of brute force as a primary means of social control. Both workers and the old oligarchy, returned to power, tended to express this tendency toward physical aggression. The former, finding the unions now unresponsive or hostile to their desires, resorted to wildcat strikes, sabotage, and occasionally violent public uprising[73]; meanwhile, the traditional elites, having regained power, this time "less as entrepreneurs than as brokers and agents for the multinationals" (Rock 332), responded by loosing upon unruly workers what rock band Almafuerte would pithily denominate "el perro guardián" ("Los delirios del defacto")—the military, which found its ranks bolstered and its powers augmented by Frondizi's CONINTES plan, to the extent that civil society often seemed on the verge of being swallowed up entirely by martial rule.

In a 1999 biography of Pepe Biondi, Elbio Tomassini and Matías Babino cite the actor as having said "La tv se inventó para mí y me estaba esperando" (193). The

[73] Tellingly, as James points out, the 1960s' most notable example of this, the *cordobazo* (May 1969), was carried out by workers in Córdoba's relatively new auto manufacturing sector, many of whom did not belong to the old unions centered in Buenos Aires.

popularity of *Viendo a Biondi* seems to confirm this statement. However, it might have been just as appropriate for him to say "la *época* me estaba esperando"; who better to poke fun at the physical aggression—or threat thereof—now experienced by large sectors of the population, than a man who grew up as a victim of abuse and as an adult had turned learned to make a living by parodying violence in front of an audience? Though by all accounts Biondi himself was of a peaceable nature, his biography reads like a litany of structural, systemic, and interpersonal violence. As a child his impoverished parents, unable to support him, sent him off to join the Circo Anselmi, where his training as acrobat included regular beatings delivered by a clown known as Chocolate. Having escaped this situation, he nevertheless was forced to make a living doing acrobat work, subjecting his body to risky stunts that caused injuries from which he would suffer for the rest of his life. To some extent, even after gaining immense popularity, he continued to be the object of violence associated with widely disparate ideologies. In 1959, while working for Goar Mestre's Cuban television channel, he was kidnapped by revolutionary forces and deported; Castro's summary explanation for this action: "En este momento Cuba no debe reír" (Tomassini and Babino 127). Later, at Buenos Aires' Canal 13, the CBS-backed enterprise also run by Mestre and described by Varela as the country's most ruthlessly capitalist channel of the pre-*Proceso* era, he was dropped immediately when his ratings began to waver. His loyalty to Mestre, the Cuban TV magnate who after the revolution had transplanted his ambitions to more fertile economic environs, was ultimately not repaid in kind, and Biondi had to do the last program of his career, just

three years before his death in 1975, at Canal 11, where conditions were less than ideal for successful production.

Given this personal history, one gets the feeling that the phrase "¡Qué suerte para la desgracia!" repeated by one of his few unnamed characters, has an autobiographical ring to it, and among his large repertoire of personae, most of them receiving the actor's first name and a humorously allegorical surname—Pepe Curdeles (a drunken lawyer), Pepe Estropajo (le tiene alergia al trabajo), the soldier Pepe Metralla, etc.—one does encounter a good number of perpetual losers. However, there are also nominally successful ones like the ladies' man and mass-media darling, Narciso Bello, and the Duque de Aguaforte, a nouveau riche who has bought himself a title with the money made from mineral deposits discovered on his property. Perhaps the most representative of Biondi's characters, though, is Pepe Galleta, a *guapo* who rules his neighborhood with an iron fist but who inevitably meets his comeuppance toward the end of each sketch. This intermediate status—he beats people up but also gets beaten—tends to emphasize the absurd and arbitrary nature of the physical violence depicted. Also, it is perhaps in the Pepe Galleta sketches where Biondi best displays his knack for physical humor, from the openings, when he enters doing an idiotic jive reminiscent of a marionette's interpretation of a *West Side Story* routine, through the rest of the pieces, which include frequent flexing of (quite skinny) biceps, the hurling about of set props, in addition to his customary facial expressions and posturing. Watching Biondi, one is reminded of Henri Bergson's definition of corporal humor as the revelation of "something mechanical in something living" (149); Pepe Galleta looks like a puppeteer's version of a tough guy.

It's no wonder that such a concept would occur to Bergson in turn-of-the-century France where the industrial revolution was making a late appearance, nor that Charlie Chaplin, who spent tender childhood years in a London workhouse, would give this concept some of its most striking filmic realizations; nor should it surprise us that Pepe Biondi, a great admirer of Chaplin who came of age in an industrializing nation increasingly subject to the long-distance manipulation of international purse strings, would come to portray such a perfect incarnation of the puppet. Biondi never *becomes the machine,* like the Little Tramp almost does in *Modern Times* (1936), but the idea of the puppet seems prevalent in his work, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the "Pepe Galleta" sketches, when the *guapo* enters accompanied by Lawrence Welk's instrumental version of "Sugar Shack," and proceeds to engage in senseless violence against friends and enemies alike.

It's difficult to know whether the popular appeal of this show could be interpreted as a case of systemic violence—i.e., an audience ratifying, through laughter, the same violence in which they would participate as victims and / or perpetrators. Just as likely, it caused the sort of reflection I have already associated with Niní Marshall's fans; that is, Biondi's fans had the capacity to recognize in Pepe Galleta an exaggerated facet of their own characters—one deserving derision—and that the laughter may have even helped to transform their approach to the various sorts of violence surrounding them.[74]

[74] The uprising in 1969 in Córdoba, precisely the place where, due to the recent development of auto-assembly plants, the foreign puppetmasters' influence had become most obvious, suggests that some raising of consciousness had indeed occurred, to the extent that workers and students were looking to transform their inclinations toward participation in structural and systemic violence into a revolt that could challenge the system itself.

All the same, and for reasons probably similar to those affecting Bores' work, Biondi's sketches were hardly open incitations to rebellion. To an even greater extent than Bores, Biondi avoided explicit reference to current political events and the naming of names. While Bores described the inanity of official discourse and the resulting social chaos, Biondi showed bodies contorted by this chaos; however, these bodies are generally desexualized and ultimately subject to the rule of law, even when this law is represented by the drunken attorney, Pepe Curdeles. Indeed, *Viendo a Biondi* sometimes depicts—at least superficially—the presence of state power as an indicator of progression from *barbarie* to *civilización*. One such sketch expresses this progression by parodying one of the country's most beloved popular theatrical traditions. "Pepe en el conventillo" contains most of the elements of Alberto Vacarezza's famous definition (1932) of the *sainete criollo,*[75] but changes the ending. The voice-over accompanying the opening shot of a patio foreshadows this modification: "Pintoresco conventillo, donde todo se ha mezclado: lo moderno, y lo anticuado."

Until the ending, and aside from Biondi's characteristically hyperbolic body language and enunciation, the piece evolves in predictable *sainete* fashion, with the nascent love affair between Pepe and the *percanta* (Luisina Brando), continually interrupted by the physically and verbally abusive *malevo* (José Díaz Lastra) who inevitably challenges Pepe to a fight. This culminating event is built up by the late arrival of Pepe, who of course does eventually arrive to "cumplir la promesa" and, one

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[75] "Un patio, un conventillo, un italiano encargao, un goyega retobao, una percanta, un vivillo, un chamuyo, una pasión, choque, celos, discusión, desafíos, puñaladas y una disparada, auxilio, un cana y telón" (Vacarezza 32).

assumes, to defend his honor. After an exchange of insults, wherein Pepe's enemy threatens to kill him, the two men get ready to do battle. "Preparate," the *malevo* advises Pepe. "Estoy preparado," he replies. "Yo traje un revólver y dos cuchillos," the bad guy menaces, "¿y vos?" "Yo traje un sargento y dos vigilantes," Pepe counters, and these three men promptly enter the scene and take the *malevo* off to jail, while Pepe marches off arm in arm with the love interest. Despite the possibility that it might be undercut by Pepe's absurdly parodic persona—here, that of the dandy—one must admit the overt message here is that the rule of law has come to resolve these sorts of interpersonal disputes, making obsolete the adherence to old-fashioned codes of honor.

Other sketches, such as "El preso" and "La guerra y la paz" also seem to justify state power, if only on a superficial level. In the first piece, Pepe plays a prisoner who is mistreated by his fellow inmates until a guard arrives to announce he has been cleared of all charges and may return to his former work, which as it turns out is that of prison guard; the sketch ends with him donning his uniform cap and hitting his erstwhile oppressors with a nightstick. The second one unfolds a similar sequence, with Pepe here appearing as a laborer abused by his superiors. In its last scene, a war has broken out, and the former bosses must come to terms with the fact that Pepe is now their commanding officer. Though in both cases the apparent idiocy of the protagonists could possibly call into question the intellectual capacity of those clad in state-supplied uniform, this message would have been secondary and obviously was not perceptible enough to call the attention of the censors.

Curiously, criticism and fandom tend to remember Biondi as a representative of "un humor sano." This description, repeated in the biography by Tomassini and Babino, also appears often in the comments sections of Biondi's YouTube clips, and refers principally to the lack of curse words and sexuality in his work. However, when one considers the history of popular Argentinian humor from the late 19th century to present, in Biondi's performances—and in those of other comedians of the same period—this lack stands out as frankly aberrant and in fact partially denotative of what might be described as *sickness*, in both artistic and social terms. Instead of a robust humor, able to mobilize both unrestrained corporal reference and sociopolitical critique—including direct reference to public figures—in order to fulfill its traditional promise of *dépaysement* and salubrious liberation from disciplining discourse, what we have here is a comedy that has had various of its vital organs removed by the scalpels of official puritanism and despotism. It thus clings desperately to parodic evocations of the physical violence to which citizens were at this time ever more subject, and even in this sense, it is condemned to commission of systemic violence concomitant with ratification of the state's right to use brute force with impunity.

However, I do not mean to suggest that Biondi's attempt to *poner el cuerpo,* insofar as it was permitted, in his comic television work, was simply a case of collaborationism. Besides the likely presence of polysemic textual resistances to which I have already alluded, V*iendo a Biondi's* very popularity suggests a resistance, on the level of reception, to international trends in mass media which had by now established the sitcom as television's most popular comic genre. The sitcom, which as Paul Julian

Smith argues, tends to portray processes of "working through" current social issues—i.e., at the end of every program, its characters arrive at a compromise that resolves their dispute—can for this same reason become an effective tool for state control, by reducing all social problems to matters of individual voluntarism. Sketch, on the other hand, tends to leave tensions unresolved or even to accentuate them. Also, sitcom's structure tends to emphasize social continuity, while sketch keeps the audience on its toes by continually introducing novel characters and situations. As revealed by Tato Bores' descriptions of the protean sociopolitical circumstances of the time, sketch's format simply remained more representative of current Argentinian reality, and audience choices confirmed this correspondence. Thus, despite its infirmity, Biondi's program and others like it made for the continued survival of sketch as an embodied cultural practice that could—and would eventually, as we will see—be resurrected in all of its blasphemous and politically rebellious glory.

KID GLOVES FOR 1960S COMEDY

Pepe Biondi's success inspired a host of programs that generally imitated his mix of physical humor and classic format, with inversion as a primary structure—i.e., the husband beaten by his wife, the tough guy who meets his comeuppance, the milquetoast turned Type A—and content that generally avoided direct confrontation with nodes of sociopolitical power. *La tuerca* (1965-1974), sometimes cited (Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén, and Moglia) as being rather edgy for its time, appears to have stuck mainly to

Bores' (and to some extent, Biondi's) formula involving the depiction of social chaos without deep consideration of its causes or naming of names.[76] Other programs, such as *Telecataplúm,* avoided the question entirely by catering principally to middle- and upper-class audiences with "parodias de todas las comedias musicales, como *Porgy and Bess*, óperas, obras de teatro, películas, personajes de la historia como Cleopatra o zarzuelas como *La verbena de la paloma*" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 187). Meanwhile, censorship sent clear messages regarding the lines that were not to be crossed. In 1963, for example, José María Guido's administration prevented the airing of a sketch, on one of Dringue Farías' programs, in which two little people did impressions of Guido and of Isaac Rojas,[77] the former vice president who had recently led a coup attempt against the current president. As I have already suggested, the mixing of physical humor and explicit reference to political figures in this performance is typical of sketch and *revista* material going at least as far back as *La Gran Vía* (1886), but appears to have been considered too potentially explosive for early electronic mass media.

Confronted with this repressive situation, many comedians responded by shifting their focus away from adult themes and concentrating on younger audiences who could be entertained without political, sexual or scatological references. Some artists, like Carlos Balá, described by Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén (175) as "ingenuo, algo infantil, y bonachón," fit naturally into the role of children's entertainer. Others, however, had to

[76] In one sketch that was repeated with multiple variations, a character named Efraín Troncoso, played by former circus clown Joe Rígoli, tries to plant a tree outside his house, but inevitably runs up against bureaucratic resistance that can only be circumvented by paying a bribe. Another featured Tincho Zabala in the role of the fictitious "Victoriano Barragán, un inspector municipal coimero" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 235, 249).
[77] Both men were in fact of diminutive stature.

modify their non-televisual acts significantly to assume the requisite image of innocent simpleton. This transformation probably assumed its most dramatic aspect with Pepe Marrone, who had already become famous in *revista,* where his revolutionary efforts resembled those of Lenny Bruce in US stand-up. As described by Raquel Prestigiacomo, "la revista se puede dividir en *antes* y *después* de Marrone. ¿El porqué? La introducción de las malas palabras en el texto del monólogo" (124). However, in his television program, appropriately titled *Los trabajos de Marrone* (1960-1963), the comedian suffered the elimination of all trace of this "realismo verbal" (Prestigiacomo 124) from his act. Aside from the inevitable presence in the audience of "Angelita's mother," we must assume that the success of this program—"Conquistó a la platea adulta cautivando primero a los pibes" (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 185)—had as much to do with the lack of alternatives as with adult preferences for infantile diversion. Indeed, Biondi himself admitted to owing a good deal of his triumph to the adoption of a similar strategy: "Mucho de mi éxito se debe a los niños, cuando me ven pegar cachetadas y trompadas" (Tomassini y Balbino 140). Like Marrone's program, only perhaps to a lesser extent, the puerile quality of *Viendo a Biondi* did not reflect any supposed true artistic nature of its resident *capocómico*, but was rather a conscious tactic for survival in the puritanical new medium; as his biographers relate, in the 1930s Biondi had had no problem incorporating acts with a marked "tono sexual" (Tomassini y Balbino 74) into his routine with the Cabaret Royal de Montevideo.

In addition to mainstream comedy with a juvenile aspect, 1960s television also offered various programs aimed explicitly at child audiences. As Pablo Sirvén (1988)

notes, many comedians of the time worked in both fields, and this moonlighting, I suggest, was facilitated by censors who ensured there would essentially be little difference between the two types of programming. One such artist bears mention here, not only because his show, *El Capitán Piluso* (1960-1969), was the most-watched children's show of the decade, but because his *No toca botón* (1981-1987) would bear the standard of (adult) sketch comedy on into the 1980s. It seems almost too appropriate that Alberto Olmedo, who would eventually revolutionize televised sketch with his flare for improvisation and his taste for the risqué, made his first inroads into popularity dressed up in children's clothing as the "muchacho simple," Capitán Piluso (Pelletieri 150). Televised comedy, like the medium itself, was in its infancy, and this stage was being unnaturally protracted by puritanical and repressive authority figures.

Conclusions—In the Belly of the Beast

Although, as I have suggested, early Argentinian radio may have been more isolated from popular culture than some other researchers have indicated, there is a good possibility that television—in particular, privately owned TV—takes the mediatic cake for savage international capitalism and cultural imperialism. Though Mirta Varela titles her 2005 book *La televisión criolla…,* she raises serious doubts as to whether such an institution ever actually existed. One of her various insights in this work is that the advent of television corresponds almost perfectly with the switchover, during Perón's second term, from domestically funded light industry, to heavy industry dependent upon

a preponderance of foreign capital. In television as in other business—notably auto manufacturing, centered in Córdoba—this tendency would become even more marked during the 1960s, which saw the beginnings of private television. As noted by Guillermo Mastrini, the first three private channels, Canal 9, Canal 11, and Canal 13, were founded upon classic neoliberal collusions between national economic, religious, and military elites, and foreign capital, here represented by the US media groups CBS, NBC, and ABC. By formally focusing their operations only on *production,* these firms neatly circumvented the national broadcasting law—*la Ley de Radiodifusión 15.460*, passed in 1957—that prohibited the ownership of channels by foreign corporations. The result: while broadcasting towers remained under domestic control, the foreign companies "en realidad eran las que detentaban el control de los canales" (Mastrini 114). Varela singles out Goar Mestre's 13 as the channel that most perfectly incarnates the resultant union of cultural production and brazen profiteering. As we have seen, even Pepe Biondi, arguably TV's most-watched figure of the 1960s, was in the end one more victim of this televisual leviathan, which excreted him summarily as soon as his rating began to fail.

All the same, this comedian's *popularity*—and that of other programs resembling *Viendo a Biondi*—is not exclusively of the class- and ethnicity-blind variety, to be measured by ratings numbers and advertising dollars, but rather retains something of *el pueblo* and of this people's tradition of resistance to co-optation by hegemonic interests, whether domestic or foreign. In his introduction to the 2008 publication, *Resistencias y mediaciones: estudios sobre cultura popular,* Pablo Alabarces insists that despite the overwhelming odds against it, "la resistencia permanece en un pliegue, en el *principio de*

escisión del que hablaba Gramsci: esa pertinaz posición diferencial de los subalternos que les permite pensarse, aun en las situaciones de hegemonía más impenetrables, como distantes y diferentes de las clases dominantes" (25). What hegemonic situation could be more impenetrable than the tyranny of the rating, so often decried by critics as responsible for a plethora of entertainment woes, as its attendant dominance of capitalist over civic values has resulted in homogenization of content, demagogic emphasis on the "lowest common denominator," the prevalence of sensationalist rather than "cultural" or "educational" programming, and so on?

Nevertheless, *Viendo a Biondi,* and televised sketch comedy in general, which as I have argued constitutes a formal outgrowth of a long tradition of popular resistance, came to reside precisely at the center of this savage capitalist[78] entity, the rating. True, this centrality came about more as the result of an ingestion, rather than a penetration, and as we have seen, the caustic environment where sketch now found itself did in fact erode away some of its once prominent extremities—notably, the capacity for drawing explicit and comprehensive connections between the body and disciplining discourses. Nevertheless, sketch's ratings reveal a certain obstinacy on the part of a public whose cultural memory would not allow for wholesale adoption of trends in international media. Instead of being drawn in entirely by the sitcom craze, Argentinian audiences held onto sketch as their favorite comic format. This resistance was more a phenomenon of *reception* than of production, for from the beginning Argentinian TV offered all sorts of

[78] When one considers that this term, in peripheral settings, connotes the collusion between international and local elites, it is interesting to note that modern audience measurement was invented in São Paulo by radio czar and disciple of George Gallup, Auricéleo Penteado.

programming, including the sitcom, some of whose properties I have already discussed briefly in the section on Pepe Biondi. In the 1950s, the success of *I Love Lucy* in the US inspired an Argentinian variant called *Cómo te quiero, Ana* (1951-1957) and in the 1960s *La familia Falcón* was the most watched of such programs. With hindsight, even the name of the latter show, whose propagandistic tendencies can be gleaned by reading the description provided by Ulanovsky, Itkin and Sirvén,[79] sounds positively creepy, as the Ford Falcon, whose ad money paid for the program's production, was also the vehicle of choice for secret police on kidnapping raids during the most recent dictatorship. If the "working through" and happy ending of each *La familia* episode would not suffice to keep the rabble-rousers at bay, other methods would be employed.[80]

Thus, while diachronic analysis of Argentinian sketch tends to reveal the corroded aspect of its 1960s televisual variety, synchronic contextualization with concurrent programming makes shows like *Viendo a Biondi* look downright unruly. Many of traditional sketch's primary characteristics remain, such as a relative emphasis on discontinuity and surprise, protean flexibility of personae, willingness to show unresolved social conflict and the complete spectrum of social strata, and de-emphasis of officially sanctioned heteronormative relationships and family structures. Perhaps just as importantly, the basic format itself remains, and from this position it could—and

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[79] For example, while keeping in mind Moglia's comments regarding "castidad, docilidad y modestia," I cite these authors' description of Elina Falcón, played by Elina Colomer: "Tiene instrucción secundaria cumplida y es muy religiosa. Cree en los valores establecidos, es una mujer sin maldad. Es culta, aunque algo despistada…" (181).

[80] Further corroborating the hand-in-hand relationship between discursive and physical coercion, a 2002 article in the newspaper La Nación reports that top Ford Argentina executives were eventually accused of direct involvement in the illegal detention and subsequent deaths of around two dozen employees of the company.

would—as we will see, eventually regenerate some of the parts that were digested away during the caustic beginnings of electronic mass media.

Chapter 3—San Alberto Olmedo: 1980s Sketch and its Roots in Popular Unity

A clip from the 2012 movie *Peter Capusotto y sus videos* ("Peter Capusotto y sus 3Dimensiones—Bombita Rodríguez") purports to reveal the content of recently declassified CIA files regarding the early-1970s development of a plot for using the media to instill leftist Peronism in the United States. Through manipulation of the entertainment business, crafty politicians, showmen, and directors would effect a transformation of the northern economic and military giant into Los Estados Unidos Justicialistas de Norteamérica, complete with a U.S. flag in which the stars of the upper left corner are been replaced by the Peronist coat of arms. After showing us a picture of the famous Hollywood hillside sign, which has had the words "junto a Perón" appended to it, the clip divulges parts of some of the propaganda project's cinematic and theatrical undertakings, most of which, we are told, were never completed.

Thus, for example, we see a brief parody of *Peter Pan,* called *Peter FAR,*[81] in which an Evita-faced Tinker Bell tells the protagonist, "Si quieres volar, sólo debes tener sueños revolucionarios, y creer en ellos;" when after making an initial effort, Peter only gets half a meter off the ground, she reassures him, "Esto es porque todavía eres muy burgués; cuando te proletarices, vas a lograrlo." Also, Frank Wilder, the "Walt Disney peronista," has produced a version of *The Lion King* called *The Perón King,* which has

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[81] The FAR, or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, was a leftist guerrilla group that formed in 1960s Argentina, inspired by recent developments in Cuba. In the early 1970s the FAR merged with the more famous Montoneros ("Acta de unidad de FAR y Montoneros" 1973).

replaced the former movie's famous racist / capitalist indoctrination[82] with "una historia acerca del trasvasamiento generacional."[83]

However, just as the plans of Perón's socialist supporters were stymied by their reactionary brethren, who also called themselves *peronistas,* so Capusotto's fictional propaganda machine is brought to a halt by a clash between left and right. In a parody of the disastrous preparations for Perón's triumphant arrival at the Ezeiza airport on June 20, 1973, after nearly 18 years of exile, the sketch portrays the botched inauguration in Michigan of a Peronist amusement park—"una unidad básica[84] de diversiones." Thus, when "miles de peronistas estadounidenses" including the Peronist Youth movement[85] have assembled at the site of the ribbon-cutting, their celebration is ruined by the arrival of El Ortodoxo Yogui (obviously imitating El Oso Yogui, or Yogi Bear) and Los Tres Pesados (in imitation of Los Tres Chiflados—the Three Stooges).[86]

And just as at Ezeiza, the ensuing battle goes badly for the leftists. Los Tres Pesados and El Ortodoxo Yogui, employing Three-Stooges-type physical gags, easily defeat the "simpáticos personajillos" of the Peronist Youth, taking the stage, shutting down the ceremony and thus signaling the beginning of the end for this "sueño de entretenimiento revolucionario, que buscaba un mundo justo, igualitario y fraterno."

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[82] See, for example, García (129) and Artz (12).
[83] Perón's term for the passing-down of revolutionary ideals from one generation to the next ("Ese es el trasvasamiento generacional del que nosotros hablamos").
[84] The "unidades básicas," neighborhood centers for political organization as well as education, were founded by Perón and the concept continues to exist even today. See, for example, the website (soloperonista.com) of the organization Soloperonista, centered in Córdoba.
[85] A recruiting poster shows an Uncle Sam with Perón's face aiming an iconic index figure at the viewer, with the text underneath, "I want YOU for the Peronist Youth."
[86] At Ezeiza, the Peronist left, supported by groups like the Juventud Peronista and the more violent Montoneros, faced off against *el peronismo ortodoxo,* comprising the unions and their often mafia-like leadership.

The mechanism behind the humor of this sketch approximates a Bergsonian inversion. Of course, it is the United States' entertainment industry, not Argentina's, which has infiltrated the markets of other countries, spreading—sometimes fortuitously, sometimes by design—the ideology of capitalism and the "American way of life." Meanwhile, Peronism as an egalitarian sociopolitical movement rooted in popular nationalism only had significant media support *within* Argentina during the years just prior to and during Perón's first two presidencies. After this time, media became increasingly controlled by foreign interests. Consider, for example, that in the 1960s the de facto owners of the country's first three private television channels were NBC, ABC, and CBS (Mastrini 114). Finally, during the most recent dictatorship (1976-1983) Argentina's fizzling cultural production very nearly sputtered out entirely, as part of a larger industrial shut-down effected by the military leaders at the behest of international lenders.

Capusotto's sketch thus exudes a tone of bitter understatement. Far from ending plans for an Argentinian counter-cultural imperialism, the Ezeiza disaster and its aftermath in fact endangered even the *domestic* survival of Argentinian media. This thinning of endemic expression has continued up to our own time.[87] However, as attested to by Capusotto's work itself, the quantitative lack of domestic production may to some extent be made up for by the vibrancy and cultural rootedness of its surviving exemplars.

While freedom of speech, legally at least, recovered rapidly after the repressive *Proceso*, the country's production machine, like its social fabric, suffered much longer-

[87] Illustrating a facet of this phenomenon with a sports metaphor, in a 2015 interview prominent actor Ricardo Darín said "El cine nacional juega de visitante en la Argentina" (Domínguez).

term damage. This chapter describes a period during which sketch comedy engaged (with) the crisis contemporaneously shaking up its sociopolitical environment. In terms of content, this resulted in a kind of rebirth involving the return and refinement of long-lost traits and acquisition of new ones. However, these years also bore witness to a creeping disappearance of sketch's televisual *habitat,* if one might describe as such the essential connection between television programming and individual audience members.

Content-wise, sketch comedy was able to move from a state of rigid repression toward the recovery of some of its pre-televisual glories. Amongst these, one can cite the following: the return of a dominant spirit of improvisation; a certain liberty of enunciation regarding Bakhtin's "lower bodily stratum"; and the beginnings, though still tentative, of a corresponding freedom vis à vis political criticism. All these qualities had been present in early popular theatre, but were practically eliminated from early electronic media after a brief period of relative anarchy during radio's pioneering days in the 1920s. Also recovering from a long hibernation, one discovers in televised sketch from this time period a propensity for breaking the proverbial fourth wall and engaging in meta-discourse. Far from signaling the advent of an *elevated* avant-gardism, these latter developments helped to cement recovery of improvisational, bodily, and political elements, by engaging popular audiences directly and building televisual literacy.

However, while sketch held top positions in the ratings through the 1970s and even to some extent during the years of the dictatorship, it would bear its share of the continued economic decline during democratically-elected Raúl Alfonsín's presidency (1983-1989). Mirroring developments in other industry, the production of programming

at home had become often more expensive than importing *enlatados* (this term, rife with Fordist overtones, is commonly used to describe foreign programming bought for local distribution). Meanwhile, the remnants of local production faced an identity crisis, as producers turned more than ever to foreign-inspired formats in an attempt to attract audiences by now accustomed to imported television. Thus, paradoxically, the effective televisual *liberation* of sketch's content was accompanied by a correspondingly progressive reduction in audience.[88]

In order to more vividly perceive this moment of dramatic transformation, encapsulating both success and failure, I have chosen to depart from the pattern established in other chapters of this dissertation. Here, instead of giving a panoramic view of comic programming, I focus primarily on the country's leading *capocómico* of the post-dictatorial 1980s, Alberto Olmedo. This structural shift allows for a certain flesh-and-bones dramatization of the sociopolitical crisis in interaction with televised sketch. Olmedo as comedian incarnated a non-violent, largely non-ideological, popular resistance to authoritarianism, with roots going much deeper than his success of the 1980s. Just as his trajectory toward televisual fame mirrors the movement toward agency experienced

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[88] Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén's year-by-year report of the top-rated programs of the 1980s gives striking evidence of this audience decline. In 1980 the #1 spot was held by the sketch show *Polémica en el bar* (381). In 1981 (397) all three of the top-rated shows were sketchy: *Operación Ja-Ja, Polémica en el bar,* and *Calabromas*. In 1982 the Malvinas-obsessed public placed news shows related to the combat in the #1 and #3 spots, with a soccer match at #2. In 1983 *Operación Ja-Ja* returned to the top spot, but the other slots were filled by a news show at #3, and prophetically marking the beginning incursions of foreign programming into the most-watched programming, the miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* at #2. 1984, the first year of democracy for Argentina, was the last year in which a sketch program—Mario Sapag's *Las mil y una de Sapag*—would ever hold the #1 spot in Argentina's television rankings (437). At #2 that year, we find the $1 million-per-episode U.S. shoot-em-up, *The A-Team*. In fact, the rest of the 1980s would not see a sketch show even amongst the top three, with these spots being occupied instead by game shows, telenovelas, and foreign series. And as we will see in Chapter 4, the cancellation of Alfredo Casero's revolutionarily innovative sketch show *Cha cha cha* typifies the climate of the 1990s.

by this resistance, the qualified nature of his success is indicative of the extent to which cultural imperialism maintained a creeping encroachment despite putative advances in local popular expression and freedom of speech. Olmedo embodies the televisual unleashing of a long-suppressed form of local expression, at precisely the time when such expression—in Argentinian mass media, at least—began to become an endangered species.

Beyond Economics: Peronism and the Birth of a Comedian

As Daniel James contends, the Peronist élan, which has in fact extended far beyond the date of publication (1988) of James' own book and into our own time, cannot be simply chalked up to an opportunistic redistribution of wealth made possible by the windfall that had accompanied World War II, when a relative absence of the usual competitors, especially the US, had allowed Argentina to substantially expand and diversify its industrial sector, creating new, unionized jobs in enterprises like Canal 7. If Perón's magnetism had depended solely upon redistribution, it would have collapsed as soon as his second term when, running out of reserves, he reversed his original policies, taking austerity measures, becoming stricter with unions, making deals with international business, and so on. This is not to exculpate Perón from opportunism, but rather to suggest that his ability to capitalize upon the moment extended beyond the economic and the purely political, and into the realm of society and culture.

As James argues, a good deal of Perón's success may be attributed to his ability to "articulate, from a position of state power, an 'already constituted discourse'" (30) that had been formulated silently or grumbled furtively in individual households, and which demanded not just economic and political, but social justice for the workforce currently powering Argentina's entrance into the industrialized world. Since the beginning of the Great Depression, Buenos Aires had been the center of a great rural-to-urban migration that fueled the country's import-substitution project. However, the 1930's, known as the *década infame,* provided precious little political representation for these new urbanites. Instead, politicians used the *rhetoric* of democracy in an attempt to smooth over a frightful record of fraud and corruption at the service of the old landed oligarchies and of industry bosses.

In his analysis of the personal testimonies of workers regarding social conditions prior to the 1943 revolution, James notes "the image of silence that runs through them" (30), and "the feelings of impotence and resignation" (28), as well as of individual isolation. Perón, on the other hand, was able to deploy imagery taken from popular culture, disdained by other politicians of the time as "burdo, chabacano" (28), to validate native popular culture from a position of power, thus encouraging the development of a vocal and active class consciousness. James remarks briefly upon Perón's "special affinity with tango lyrics" (23). Later, Matthew Karush (2012) effectively argues that the popular sources of Perón's discourse ran much deeper and wider than just tango lyrics, including, importantly, cinematic melodrama, which tended to champion the poor and cast the wealthy in a disparaging light. Perón, then, took these tropes which had

previously functioned mainly in the realm between a collective popular imaginary and cinematic symbolism, and allowed for their partial conversion into political, as well as social reality.

To a certain extent, Alberto Olmedo owed his beginnings in show business to the economic redistribution accomplished by Perón.[89] After having entered the workforce in his native Rosario at the tender age of eight to help support his single-parent family, his first experiments with performance came at age 15 as a member of an acrobatic troupe sponsored by the professional soccer club, Newell's Old Boys. As Rein (12) reports, to enhance its popular appeal the Perón administration provided unprecedented support to the development of sports, including the direct subvention of certain soccer clubs. Very likely, since Newell's had generously offered up its stadium to serve as venue for an important speech delivered by Perón to Rosario workers in 1944, this club was eventually one of the recipients of this assistance. Given such an eventuality, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the Primer Conjunto de Gimnasia Plástica, founded by Olmedo and friends in 1948, owed its existence to the populist government's patronage. Likewise, Olmedo's first job in television, as a switcher for Canal 7 in 1954, would not have existed had the government not created this state-run channel in 1951 as part of the Perónist propaganda machine.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to see Olmedo's early career as made possible exclusively by economic opportunities afforded by the new government. In fact, this career owed its beginnings just as much to the country's new social climate, which

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[89] Born in 1933, Olmedo was 13 when Perón took office, and 22 when he was forced out in 1955.

permitted and even encouraged cohesion amongst the lower and middle classes. A brief comparison of Olmedo's childhood with that of Pepe Biondi, born 24 years earlier, may serve to illustrate the effects of this new social milieu.

Both men were born into desperately poor families, had to begin working as children, and in terms of formal education did not progress beyond primary school. However, despite his large family, and recalling James' description of the "silence" of pre-1940s working class, Biondi's early biography abounds in images of solitude. The family found little succor in informal ties, organized charity, or government assistance. This isolation was so pronounced that young Pepe's departure from the family home at the age of seven, to join the circus under the tutelage of the abusive clown known as Chocolate, seemed to his parents like the boy's best chance.

By contrast, Olmedo grew up surrounded by a close-knit peer group, some of them poor like him, some middle-class, who would be instrumental not just in securing for him the beginnings of a career, but even in assuring his day-to-day survival and well-being. As Tizziani (18) reports, the young Olmedo spent significant periods of time living with these friends, whose parents did not mind having an extra mouth to feed. Probably, Olmedo's entertaining and sympathetic personality had much to do with this acceptance, but he undoubtedly also benefitted from the newly hegemonic sociopolitical imagery that discursively repositioned his class of origin as the motor moving the country forward. We may find evidence of the sociocultural capital now inherent to Olmedo's working-class

roots in the affectionate nickname, "el Negro," that he received during this period and that his fans still use today.[90]

Also, thanks to this wide circle of acquaintances, in 1947 Olmedo came to know Salvador "Chita" Naón, who was at the time chief of the claque at Rosario's Teatro La Comedia, and who would incorporate him into this group of professional applauders, affording the young gymnast a bird's-eye perspective on local showbiz. Finally, through yet another friend, fellow *rosarino* Pancho Guerrero, Olmedo obtained his initial Buenos Aires job as switcher at Canal 7.[91] Thus, though he eventually achieved uncommon fame, the circumstances surrounding Olmedo's entry into show business, and then into television itself, can be described as typifying the economic redistribution, but also the growth of working-class solidarity and agency, associated with Juan D. Perón's political ascendancy.

Olmedo and the Quasi-Perónist Carnival

The results of the economic and social shifts brought about by the popular-centric rhetoric and politics of the time surely surpassed Perón's own expectations. So much was this the case, in fact, that much of Perón's action as president would consist of an effort to "control the heretical challenge he had unleashed" (James 34) before moving into the

[90] In *porteño* dialect *negro* can be used derogatorily, but also affectionately. The term can refer to skin color, but as evidenced by the Pibes Chorros song "Negro soy" (2003) in which the primary information given to support the title's asseveration is that the lyrical narrator drinks boxed wine, this word can also refer partially or exclusively to *habitus* and repertoire associated with popular classes.

[91] Besides giving him the professional step up, like many of the future comedian's other friends Guerrero and his mother also practically adopted the young Olmedo, feeding and housing him when he had no place else to go.

Quinta de Olivos. Despite his populist talk, Perón had definite authoritarian tendencies; for him the ideal society—as described, for example, in his tellingly-titled philosophical treatise *La comunidad organizada*—was a well-oiled production machine, not a boisterous celebration. He thus deployed mechanisms of control that were similar and in some cases identical to those utilized by the country's past and future military regimes. *Lunfardo* remained banned throughout most of his presidency, sexuality and public criticism of the regime were taboo subjects, and famous tango lyrics were even rewritten to promote Perón's *virtuous* image of a proletariat that did not gamble, drink, or party, and whose assigned modus vivendi was "de la casa al trabajo, del trabajo a la casa" (Perón 1945).

Nevertheless, the popular response to the community-building[92] and to definite, if temporary, increases in affluence achieved just prior to and during Perón's administration sometimes did resemble a long-deserved celebration. Immigrant (1890-1930) and rural / provincial to urban (after 1930) workers had been building the country's industry for over half a century with little economic or social capital to show for it, and even a partial reversal of this situation warranted a fête of carnivalesque dimensions. This truth was perhaps best dramatized by the gathering of 200,000 workers and their families in the Plaza de Mayo on 17 October, 1945, to demand the release of Coronel Juan Perón, who had been arrested four days earlier. As Secretary of Labor he had already begun to cause nervousness amongst economic and political elites and affiliated members of the military.

[92] This activity focused on labor unions and extended out into humanitarian projects like those propelled by the Fundación Eva Perón.

Daniel James' description of this event highlights its carnivalesque characteristics. "Most sensitive observers," he writes, "have agreed upon the dominant tone of irreverence and ironic good humor amongst the demonstrators on that day"; and "the atmosphere resembled "a great fiesta, of carnival groups, of candomblé" (32). Since these denizens of low-rent multifamily housing on the urban periphery generally did not enter the city center, partly because of the police's tendency to harass them and drive them away, the gathering in the Plaza de Mayo represented a rupture of established *habitus* and repertoire, and a "subversion of spatial hierarchy" (32). Meanwhile, tellingly, condemnation of this invasion of so-called *cabecitas negras* came not only from the political right, but from the left as well, and even the communist press scornfully described the "aspecto de murga" (32) of some of the groups involved in the demonstration.

Contrary to authoritarian emphases on control such as that espoused even by Perón himself, such celebration may serve a practical purpose, providing an escape valve for rancors associated with engrained *habitus* and hierarchy. Additionally, by bringing otherwise discrete social elements into contact with each other, carnivalesque gatherings give space to a semiotic fluidity that can encourage adaptation and communal solidarity. In addition to its ostensible political goal, the gathering in the Plaza de Mayo thus also served a concrete social purpose by opening the city's bureaucratic and commercial center to social classes it had previously excluded. For its own good, Buenos Aires could no longer ignore the centrality of these groups to the continuation of its hegemonic status.

In labor practice, however, much hierarchy remained in effect, and Olmedo's original job at Canal 7 positioned him behind the cameras rather than in front of them. As a switcher during the pre-videotape era, when all programming was live, he had the high-pressure but largely unrecognized job of deciding which of the studio's three simultaneous camera shots should be transmitted in any given moment. Though he showed aptitude for this task, quickly becoming chief switcher, it was not this success which would, in less than two years, first lead to his venturing out from behind the cameras and into the key light.

The event that did in fact precipitate this transition warrants some description here, as it is indicative of the spirit of *carnaval* that he seemed to carry around with him, and of the practical purpose that could be served by the unleashing of this spirit. The years 1954-1955 had been turbulent for Argentina in general and particularly for Canal 7. As I have previously mentioned, in 1954 Perón privatized Canal 7, turning it over to the Editorial Haynes, but in 1955 the officials in charge of the *Revolución Libertadora* made it public again, with corresponding changes in directorship. (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 56, 66)

As Tizziani (40-41) reports, in December of that year, the channel threw an end-of-the-year dinner party, attended by a crowd of over 100 that included actors, technicians, and members of both the old and the new directorships. This mix of personnel proved nearly catastrophic, as arguments broke out between those leaving the channel and those joining it. A fistfight was narrowly avoided and people had begun to

leave the site discreetly when Olmedo leapt up on a table and began dancing, singing, and doing impressions of the disputing parties.

This spectacle drew attendees back to the event and facilitated the opening of peaceful conversation that lasted until the dinner's originally anticipated final moments. The channel's comptroller, Julio Bringuer Ayala, offered Olmedo acting work on the spot. Though the *peronato* had ended, a good deal of its social lesson undoubtedly remained intact; not only was the channel's leadership capable of using a poor, unschooled technician's upending of professional hierarchy for their own edification, but they could also imagine the centrality of such a young man in a new medium destined—at least in the minds of a few dreamers[93]—for massive popularity.

"EL DIABLO SE APODERÓ DE MEU"[94]—*OLMEDO'S PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT*

While Olmedo may be described as his generation's *capocómico,* he did not arrive here merely through the combination of personal dispositions with current social conditions; he also owed a great deal to his professional environment, which provided many of the elements with which he built his career. Various of his coworkers have described the comedian's ability to shift into what seemed almost a state of *possession*

[93] Granted, in Argentina in 1955 TV sets remained prohibitively expensive for the majority, and their poor technical quality combined with the experimental nature of their programming meant that even those who could buy them were often left "preguntándose si habrá sido una buena inversión" (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 58). All the same, TV entrepreneurs of the time, who because of technical dependencies had a keen awareness of the US industry, expected that Argentina would soon follow in the footsteps of the former country, where by 1955 over half of all households were already equipped with the new apparatus (Baughman 42).

[94] This saying was often used by Olmedo's 1980s character "el manosanta," a hokey Pai Umbanda, as an excuse for his habitual excesses.

when the cameras began running; barring more supernatural explanations, two earthly agents responsible for this habitual transformation might be identified as the aforementioned spirit of newly empowered class consciousness, as well as the influence of certain key figures in comedy who were closely observed by the young Olmedo. Thus, discussion of him as proponent of televised Argentinian sketch at this crucial time in its history requires some description of the artists who helped to prepare the field for the innovations he would introduce.

Two crucial players in TV's sketch renaissance were the brothers Hugo and Gerardo Sofovich, sons of autodidact journalist and comic playwright Manuel Sofovich. As Rony Vargas (2009) details, these two grew up steeped in the popular theatre practices initiated by the Podestá family and by virtue of their writerly and directorial efforts would eventually contribute significantly to the continuation of this tradition as well as to its expansion into cinema and television. Both men wrote for *teatro de revista* and brought this experience to television. One of their early successes in the latter medium was *Operación ja-ja* (1963-1991), a program that over the years benefitted from the participation of many of television's most important comics. Olmedo himself began working here in 1964. Hugo would eventually write and / or direct most of his televisual and cinematic work. Also on *Operación ja-ja,* Olmedo met eventual lifelong collaborators like Jorge Porcel and Javier Portales, in addition to a robust crowd of artists from the *revista* scene, such as the legendary comedian Fidel Pintos and the *vedette* María Rosa Fugazot.

As we will see, much of Olmedo's work dedicates itself to the lampooning of insistences on (bourgeois) cultural *purity,* and his early collaboration with Hugo and Gerardo no doubt contributed to this comic fixation. In response to critics complaining about the lack of what they considered cultural distinction on the TV of the time, Gerardo said in 1981 "Se puede hacer cultura sin necesidad de ser culturoso…un buen show musical, un noticiero correctamente planteado, un buen programa cómico…" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén 396). This redefinition of culture as inclusive rather than exclusive social phenomenon found expression on *Operación ja-ja,* perhaps especially in the sketch "Polémica en el bar," whose popular draw is attested to by the fact that it eventually (1972) transformed into a separate program that achieved high ratings and that continued to be produced under various directorships and with varying casts until 2010.

Polémica en el bar, which reads like a televisual manual of *porteño* heteroglossia, utilizes the simple premise of a recurring reunion in a typical Buenos Aires bar between a group of friends generally comprising an intellectual, a working-class Italian immigrant, a *chanta* or con man / trickster, a conservative member of the bourgeoisie, and the Spanish owner of the establishment (*Mágicas ruinas*). Though all the components of this group find opportunities to express their personal voices, with the *chanta* in particular[95] generating a good deal of the comedy with his delusions of grandeur, central misapprehensions often stem from linguistic impasses between the intellectual, originally played by Javier Portales, and the working-class *cartonero,* played by Juan Carlos Altavista.

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[95] Originally played by *teatro de revista* star Fidel Pintos.

The latter character, "Minguito Tinguitella," with his combination of involuntary incomprehension and playful, purposeful anti-intellectualism, had radio roots predating the "Polémica" sketch and took on a life of his own, participating in numerous projects and making his creator famous in a way reminiscent of "Felipe's" importance to Luis Sandrini. One can also draw obvious parallels between Minguito and Niní Marshall's working-class immigrant characters, who as discussed in Chapter 2 played a significant role in keeping sketch comedy alive, if subdued, on the heavily-controlled airwaves of the 1940s and early 1950s.

Most often, the miscommunications arise when the intellectual brings up *high* art or current political developments and Minguito confuses the attendant terminology with vocabulary from his own sphere of reference, steeped in *lunfardo*, soccer, and television itself. A 1973 sketch, for example, shows Portales' representative of the *intelligentsia* asking each member of the group his opinion on "los cinco puntos del doctor Cámpora"—a five-point plan for democratic reconstruction after the termination of the dictatorship (the so-called *Revolución Argentina*) that had controlled the government since 1966.[96]

When Portales' intellectual, who sports Che Guevara-style sideburns and dark-rimmed glasses à la Fidel Castro, finally puts the question to Minguito, the latter man replies with bewildered indignation that Cámpora has received many more than *five*

[96] This plan, in part a response to the dictatorship's elaboration of its own five-point program aimed at retaining some power for the military despite the transition to democracy, caused widespread debate amongst *peronistas*. While some praised its defense of national industry, which included the nationalization of the banking system and of primary sectors (Seoane 205), leftists decried its protection of the capitalist machine and claimed there was little difference between Cámpora's plan and that of the military (*Política obrera* 2).

points, as six *million* Argentinians voted for him. After his friends attempt to explain the question, he again misses the mark with the word *puntos*, this time giving it its *lunfardo* meaning (guy, fellow) and naming off a list of Cámpora's close associates. When his interlocutors' further attempts at clarification make reference to the fact that the plan garnered a public statement of support from the military's own Brigadier General Carlos *Rey*, Minguito exclaims angrily that there may be kings in other countries, but not in Argentina.

Diverted, his companions momentarily leave aside the question of the *cinco puntos* and attempt to provoke further demonstrations of Minguito's ignorance, asking him to name countries with kings, but the *tano* evades their trap by engaging in a purposeful jeu de mots with the word *rey,* spuriously making a case for several nations: e.g., Brazil, which he pronounces *Grazil*, home of "el Rey Pelé"; and the United States, which produces the TV show *Rei-no salvaje* (Wild Kingdom), with "animalitos que hablan en inglé." Finally, he says, even *Polémica en el bar* has a king: the "rey-tin" (rating).

Minguito, an unwavering *justicialista,* reminds us of Peronism's rootedness in a cultural substrate whose lack of interest regarding the rarefied stratosphere of political leadership can confirm the irrelevancy of the latter just as easily as the crudity of the former. In Minguito's often jovial commentary,[97] one can hear echoes of the first *Dia de Lealtad,* where surely a significant number of the attendees had only rudimentary knowledge of high-level politics, and were drawn to the gathering just as strongly by

[97] In a letter to Ernesto Sábato, Arturo Jauretche emphasized the idea that the first Peronist celebration was full of *positive* sentiment: "no eran resentidos. Eran criollos alegres" (132).

class pride, loyalty to grassroots political bosses, and a desire for well-deserved celebration. Though Olmedo never participated in this sketch or its offshoot program, he certainly learned a thing or two from Altavista, whose sometimes defiant but never entirely self-serious revision of working-class character now includes television amongst the national *berretines,* or obsessions. Meanwhile, Portales would eventually bring experience gained as Minguito's intellectual foil to his work with Olmedo, especially on *¡No toca botón!* where Olmedo, as we will see, would update portrayals of the quasi-Peronist *habitus,* diversifying it socioeconomically and sexually, and engaging in a quantum expansion of the self-referentiality of Minguito's "rey-tin" joke, exploiting and contributing to a corresponding boom in audiences' screenic literacy.

TELEVISUAL CAPOCÓMICO AVANT (ET CONTRE) LA LETTRE

Oscar Landi (29) describes Olmedo as an "inventor" of a particularly televisual brand of humor. Indeed, as Olmedo was the first prominent Argentinian comedian whose formation was primarily televisual, it is not excessive to identify him as the primary agent in small-screen comedy's coming of age as a format with its own media-specific characteristics. However, in large part due to censorship, whether actual or threatened, perpetrated by the de facto military regimes that controlled the country for a majority of the years[98] between Olmedo's first small-screen appearance in 1956 and the beginning of

[98] The three periods of outright de facto government included the *Revolución Libertadora* (1955-1958); the *Revolución Argentina* (1966-1973); and the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (1976-1983). Though

la fiebre Olmedo in the early 1980s, as well as during relatively brief periods of nominative democracy, this maturation would take decades to develop.

The general lack of recorded programming prior to the 1980s means any description of Olmedo's work during these years will be somewhat patchy. However, enough anecdotal record exists, along with the scanty audiovisual material, to identify the fragmentary beginnings of a comedic style that would only reach full fruition after the fall of the last dictatorship in 1983. The elements of this style mirrored and perhaps encouraged a spirit of unorganized popular resistance to authoritarian regimes bent upon imposing strict codes of behavior emphasizing general orderliness, chastity, and respect for the established social hierarchy.

As I have suggested, the carnivalesque aspect of the first *Día de Lealtad Peronista* represented a subversion of the order informally imposed upon a city in which poor people were expected to remain confined to the perimeter. Though Perón played a part in initially encouraging this subversion, in the end he was a military man and successful government for him had to do with maintaining order. Furthermore, despite his tendency to occasionally scandalize intellectuals[99] with *vulgar*-sounding discourse and slogans, his idea of order could be and was expressed in terms worthy of the *ciudad letrada*. Evidence of this tendency may be found, for example, in "La comunidad

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elections during the 1958-1966 period were nominally democratic, the Peronist party was banned from participating.

[99] Perhaps the most famous of these discords pitted Perón against Jorge Luis Borges, and led the president to remove the writer from his position at the Biblioteca Nacional, instead giving him the unenviable title of "Inspector de gallinas" at the Mercado de Abasto (Ruiz).

organizada," delivered as the closing presentation at El Primer Congreso Nacional de Filosofía, in 1949.

Here, Perón outlines his "tercera posición," based not upon the cold logic of either capitalism or dialectical materialism, but upon the affirmation and generation of the affective ties that hold a society together, allowing for individual and even socioeconomic difference while at the same time emphasizing social responsibility. This treatise abounds with exhortations to love and to establish "contacto directo con las realidades de la vida de los pueblos," (7), in order to avoid either submitting people to "el despotismo de individualidades egoístas," or condemning them to "la extinción progresiva de su personalidad en una masa gobernada en bloque" (25). However, one cannot help but note a certain air of auto-referentiality in statements such as the following: "El hombre sigue siendo el mismo. Lo que ha variado es el sentido de su existencia, sujeta a *corrientes superiores*" (25). Despite its emphasis on respect for popular sensibility, this work betrays a will to express just such a "superior current" of discourse, in large part for the purpose of bringing order to what is perceived as a potentially chaotic state of affairs. The word *orden* appears on the majority of the work's pages, and "la alegre orgía de los dioses mitológicos" (11) is referred to as characterizing an infantile stage in the development of Western thought.

While celebrating modernity's conquest of freedom, Perón asserts the necessity for assuming the admittedly "difficult" task of establishing "orden entre las tropas que se apoderan de una ciudad largamente asediada" (8). Finally, the "colectivismo" expressed here, although "con base de signo individualista" (42), leaves little or no space for the

irreverent festivity expressed by the first Peronist gathering in the Plaza de Mayo. Instead, it depends upon the sober and diligent efforts of workers exercising "la virtud Socrática—la realización perfecta de la vida" (14); "virtuoso para Sócrates era el obrero que entiende en su trabajo" (15).

Even though the autocratic regimes of the next three decades expressly opposed themselves to the Peronist political party, they were certainly in line with the call to order voiced by "el viejo." Indeed, as Daniel James points out, the same union structure originally developed by Perón to distribute government largesse was later sometimes used, first by Perón himself, then by the *Revolución Libertadora* (1955-1958) and the *Revolución Argentina* (1966-1973), as well as by democratically-elected (albeit with Peronism banned) presidents Frondizi (1958-1962) and Illía (1963-1966) to beat workers into submission so that they would accept ever more inhuman wages and working conditions. As union bosses became increasingly coopted and integrated into the governmental machine, they became less concerned with representing workers and more interested in enforcing official policy.[100]

However, the methods of control exercised by Perón and generally intensified by his successors went far beyond limiting unions' capacity for extending workers' rights, and into the realm of cultural production. As Hernán Invernizzi (2014) details, though audiovisual censorship had been practiced before on a more informal level, Perón,

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[100] So much was this the case, that worker-based protest tended to begin to arise primarily in new industry that had not yet been "written in," so to speak, to the heavily monitored union system. Thus, the *Cordobazo* of 1969, a massive protest that defeated police forces and effectively took control of the city for two days, setting off a wave of similar rebellions and encouraging the development of armed leftists like the Montoneros, was masterminded by students in conjunction with workers from Córdoba's relatively new auto manufacturing industry.

inspired by the United States' Hays Code, was the first to adopt a formal set of rules for this purpose. These codes, specifying that "la familia, el Estado, el ejército, la autoridad y la ley no pueden ser objeto de escarnio," were enforced by the Comisión Nacional Calificadora, under the direction of the "todopoderoso" Secretario de Información Pública. Invernizzi describes the continuation of this project during the Revolución Libertadora (1955-1958), its "robustecimiento" under Frondizi (1958-1962), and a further tightening of the screws during Onganía's (1966-1970) Revolución Argentina, which explicitly added to the list of prohibitions "las actividades sexuales ilícitas, las insinuaciones de orden sexual, y el estímulo del erotismo" (6).

One can only imagine the difficulties, and the opportunities, posed by such a situation for a comedian prone, as was Olmedo, to fits of improvisation. Indeed, it may be that such tight controls played a role in provoking his famous distrust of written scripts. As Tizziani reports, though he was at times an avid reader, Olmedo only memorized his lines when he was given no other option. Such wariness, heavily reminiscent of the spirit of *revista*,[101] must only have been intensified by the knowledge that scripts represented not only authorial control, but a whole bureaucratic line of command bent upon superintending artistic expression.

Besides shying away from the memorized scripts generally used by most TV performers including comedians like Pepe Biondi, Olmedo showed early tendencies toward parody, basing his send-ups precisely upon certain televisual figures who seemed

[101] One recalls, for example, a scene from *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* (1956): in a dressing-room scene with Juan Carlos Barbieri, and Pedro Quartucci, the two actors assure the *revista* director, played by Lalo Malcolm, that they will study the script assiduously, but as soon as he leaves they rip this document to pieces.

especially tied to the written word: the so-called *locutor,* or announcer, whose duty it is to read a text while looking directly into the camera. By 1956 he was putting to use the experience gained from two years of critical observation of other people's manners of addressing a televisual audience, performing a recurring sketch on Canal 7 called "el Profesor de locutores," in which he poked fun at the delivery styles of the best-known TV announcers, imitating their tics, blunders, and flourishes. Tellingly, the name of the program in which this sketch was performed was *La revista de Jean Cartier* (1956-1958). Apparently, at least in this one instance, television was already translating to the small screen the venerable *revista* tradition, which goes back to *La revue des théâtres (*1728), of meta-performance, using impression and parody to de-automatize audience perception.

Thus, I suggest, far from indicating unlettered ignorance, Olmedo's reluctance to shackle his performance to the written word suggests a special sensitivity to the extent to which such language might be subject to calls to order at odds with his anti-hierarchical, chaotic comic calling. Furthermore, besides being fully capable of deciphering written text, Olmedo was a splendid *reader* of *habitus* and repertoire, and from the beginning of his televisual career showed a capacity for recognizing how TV, even in its infant stages, relied upon certain very structured modes and patterns of behavior. Eventually, this awareness would allow him to develop a mature, media-specific sort of humor that would give his carnivalization of Argentinian cultural production a reflexivity heretofore lacking in televised comedy.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Olmedo, working with writer and director Hugo Sofovich, began to expand the parameters of this meta-performance, now taking into

account not only the mannerisms of hosts and announcers, but TV production as a whole. During this time Argentina again found itself in the depths of a military regime—the so-called *Revolución Argentina* (1966-1973), which to an extent prefigured the more violent *Proceso*. Perhaps in response to this historical context, Olmedo also began to venture into political commentary, as well as to incorporate liberating improvisational work more fully into the final filmed versions of his programs.

By all accounts,[102] the beginnings of Olmedo's engagement with in-depth meta-television extend back to the creation of the character "Rucucu" in 1968. Rucucu, a magician and TV presenter with a supposedly Ukrainian accent, recalls the long-standing tradition of foreign characters in Argentinian comedy. From the *cocoliche* speakers of the *circo criollo,* to the slew of foreign observer figures in *revista,* to Niní Marshall's Italian and Spanish immigrants, these sorts of characters have been used both to de-automatize perception of local society, culture, and politics, as well as to communicate a "foreign-as-native" sort of authenticity in keeping with Buenos Aires' high percentage of immigrants. Rucucu allowed Olmedo to turn this perspective upon the production of television itself.

The results of this operation, described by script writer Hugo Sofovich, will sound familiar even to viewers who have only seen Olmedo's post-1980 work: "[Rucucu] decía la verdad sobre el medio, deschavaba todo, besaba a los camarógrafos, le sacaba los libretos al apuntador, mostraba los decorados rotos…" (Sofovich et al. 42). Indeed, Olmedo's most famous 1980s show *¡No toca botón!* takes its title from a saying used by

[102] Since very little audiovisual record is left of Olmedo's black-and-white television work, one must rely on anecdotal evidence for description of his career prior to the 1980s. A good deal of this may be found in *Queríamos tanto a Olmedo* (1991), an anthology of memorial writings by friends and co-workers.

Rucucu to dissuade audiences from changing channels during commercial breaks. Rucucu's pidginized expression de-automatizes this televisual commonplace, underlining its rather pathetic auto-promotion. Here, then, in the 1960s, we have an Olmedo who begins to trespass the televisual fourth wall, letting audiences in on the constructed nature of TV comedy and television in general.

A Prolonged Childhood

Though his insistence on orality, spontaneity, and deconstructive rule-bending could be interpreted as a sort of veiled rebellion against heavy governmental and workplace insistence upon *order,* in some ways Olmedo also had to conform to regulation. Thus, for example, like other comedians of the time, he devoted a good deal of his televised presence in the 1960s and 1970s to children's programming, in which the temptation to engage in prohibited subject matters (sex, politics) was less pressing. However, in this respect also, the constraint could sometimes provide opportunities, and these kids' shows themselves—especially *Capitán Piluso* (1960-1981)—supplied a propitious environment for certain facets of the comedian's professional development.

As I have argued in Chapter 2, the profusion of children's programs in the 1960s, many of them centered around performers who had previously only done comedy for adults, indicates the extent to which the early small screen was a target for both official censorship and auto-regulation. One one hand, Olmedo's "Capitan Piluso," a grown man

dressed as a child and carrying a slingshot around his neck, symbolizes perfectly the rather pathetic results of so much inhibition.

At the same time, these years of puerility must have contributed substantially to the powerful capacity for improvisation that Olmedo would eventually bring to his adult programming. In a recent (2014) colloquium given to a group of theatre students, Diego Capusotto described the process of comic improvisation as "una manera de jugar como niños." Rare footage of *Capitán Piluso* shows that it was in fact filmed, at least in one instance, before a live audience composed of children. They laugh at the gags performed by Piluso and his sidekick, Coquito (Humberto Ortiz), but the sound coming from the audience differs from that of an adult comedy show in that the lulls between laughter are not silent but rather are filled with childish chatter. The general atmosphere, one of lighthearted half-attention, must have provided a favorable environment indeed for the dropping of inhibition needed for improvisational work.

Very probably, a good deal of the comic value of such exercises as that described by Capusotto lie in the upending of binary oppositions that occurs when adults act like children. Such an observation may find theoretical support both in Bergson's concept of *inversion* as one of the basic processes of humor, as well as in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, where inversion is applied to social hierarchies, with King Momo serving as perhaps the most obvious example. Olmedo's own commentary regarding *Capitán Piluso* indicates that the program followed this principle of inversion quite *strictly* (if such a word may be applied to such a context): "La clave de Piluso con los chicos era que lo comprendían fácilmente, era un muchachón que pensaba exactamente como ellos y

que decía lo que a ellos les gustaba decir" (Sofovich et al. 37). Part of this code of (mis)behavior was a refusal to engage in didacticism; "en ese programa no enseñábamos nada, porque creíamos que para eso estaba la escuela." The only exception to this rule was Piluso's willingness to drink his milk when called to do so by his grandmother, thereby setting an example for "varias generaciones que tomaron la leche sin chistar gracias a Piluso" (Sofovich et al. 37).

However, as his acquaintance Juan Carlos García observes in *The History Channel's* 2008 biographical documentary, *Alberto Olmedo, "*el Negro" ritually enacted a private rebellion against this one pedagogic aspect of *El Capitán Piluso*, slyly substituting whiskey for milk. *Piluso's* childishness was thus largely a fictional projection of Olmedo's own very real refusal to grow up, and the actor's grown-up lack of innocence only allowed his own personal *acting out* to exceed, in some ways, that of his fictional counterpart. Olmedo eventually married several times and had children, but he never abandoned his version of the adolescent peer group for the family unit, as the norms of bourgeois respectability would dictate. He routinely made trips back to Rosario to hang out with his childhood buddies, and in Buenos Aires had a similar group comprising friends and coworkers, with whom he would stay out until dawn, drinking, dining, and occasionally drugging.

As one of his early writers, José Pedro Voiro says, "Yo no tenía que crear, sino expresar simplemente lo que él era, lo que decía en una charla de café. De alguna manera, el Negro era el autor de los libros que nosotros escribíamos" (Sofovich et al. 32). Effectually, then, in addition to simply ignoring scripts, Olmedo's *childish* partying

served as another way to subvert scriptural authority, this time by making the written word attendant upon orality.

Still Divided and Conquered

For the time being, Olmedo's propensity for improvisation, orality, meta-discourse, and rambunctious prolonged adolescence may have portended to some extent the coming renaissance in televised comedy that he would spearhead.[103] All these elements had formed part of sketch's theatrical past, and their gradual, now televisual, reappearance indeed suggested a rebirth. However, in his pre-1980s work at least, two of sketch's most historically important elements remained both watered-down and isolated from each other: 1) bawdy, bodily humor; and 2) incisive political commentary. In this respect Olmedo's early work resembled that of contemporaneous comedians. As we have seen in Chapter 2, this sort of dilution and isolation of *revista's* central elements occurred concomitantly with the translation of sketch to electronic media, beginning with radio in the 1930s and continuing during television's first three decades.

On early television, we have traced the split between body and politics by examining the physically-inclined (though generally PG-rated) work of Pepe Biondi in comparison with the politically critical (though solidly middle-class) creations of Tato

[103] Again, comparison with Pepe Biondi, whose show *Viendo a Biondi* ruled the ratings of the 1960s, can serve to highlight Olmedo's particularity. Biondi, a consummate family man, only married once and was not given to partying. His performances were not spontaneous, but meticulously practiced and memorized. The TV studio for him was not a meta-performative toy box whose contents could be displayed to the public, but a tool for unobtrusively reproducing what might have been a theatrical or a dance-hall performance.

Bores. As we will see, especially toward the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s, though Olmedo began to show evidence of both these tendencies, they remained—with, perhaps, one notable exception—diluted, diffuse, and generally separate.

To be sure, descriptions of Olmedo's participation in Canal 13's *El chupete* (1972-1976) reveal a certain sexual boldness that doubtless situated these sketches on the limits of acceptability for the time period, and are indicative of the direction this comedian would take after the liberalization of codes regulating such material in the 1980s. One of Olmedo's scriptwriters for this show, Juan Carlos Mesa, recounts three anecdotes that suggest a graduated escalation of salaciousness, beginning with material one might have seen even on *Viendo a Biondi,* and ending with a double entendre threatening to destroy any illusion of rectitude. The first anecdote recalls a sketch called "El gondolero" in which Olmedo played the eponymous character who habitually ruined a would-be Don Juan's chances with the women he has lured into the titillating vessel, by saying such things as "A usted lo vi la semana pasada con una rubia." Secondly, Mesa recalls a depiction of the first meeting between a Jewish father and his daughter's boyfriend, played by Olmedo. After a conversation in which the father intimates in various ways his desire for Olmedo to be less gentile, he cuts to the chase with the question, "Dígame una cosita, ¿usted no sería capaz de hacer un pequeño sacrificio?" to which the horrified boyfriend can only answer "¡Nooo!" (Sofovich et al. 52).

The last such recollection describes a sketch that comes historically full circle by re-enacting the end of Eduardo Gutiérrez' and José Podestá's foundational work *Juan Moreira* (1879, 1886), in which the valiant *gaucho* rebel is stabbed in the back by a

soldier. Says Mesa, "por supuesto, Olmedo le dio todo el doble sentido posible al hecho de ser 'ensartado por detrás', él gritaba '¡Chiriiino! Por atrás no…" (Sofovich et al. 52). Certainly, the blasphemy here becomes political, by desecrating a text that had become a venerable representative of the nation's historical identity.[104] In this sense the "Juan Moreira" sketch can be described as both revolutionary and visionary, for the comedy of the 1990s and beyond would increasingly adopt this method of engaging politics through history—avoiding the unintentional bolstering of prominent figures through the all-publicity-is-good-publicity phenomenon, while at the same time formulating a deeper systemic challenge.

This sketch, however, stands out as an exception within Olmedo's sexualized or otherwise physical work of the pre-1980s era. Typifying this work, on the other hand, we find the string of movies made by Olmedo, often in conjunction with fellow actor Jorge Porcel, during the late 1960s and through the next two decades, in which sexual comedy often provided the thematic foundation. These cinematic spectacles took advantage of *revista*-type bawdiness, sometimes in fact having plot tie-ins with some facet of *revista* production, and very often casting one or both of the celebrated *vedettes* Moria Casán and Susana Giménez, but generally kept the comedy light and not overtly political.[105]

Meanwhile, mirroring other such production of the time, Olmedo's occasional televisual criticisms of the power structure tended to shy away from grossly physical

[104] This humorous queering of a work which, like much *literatura gauchesca,* might be taken by casual observers as representative of traditional masculinity, is hardly gratuitous; Gutiérrez' novel abounds with passages describing men staring passionately into each other's eyes or exchanging prolonged kisses.
[105] Fernando Pagnoni Berns, in fact, goes so far as to claim that these early movies' depictions of frustrated attempts at adultery actually reinforced the "repressive conservative character that pervaded Argentina during the 1970s" (140).

caricatures, focusing instead on the kind of bumbling *boludez* that Tato Bores had liked to emphasize. In 1968, for example, on the Sofovich brothers' *Operación Ja Ja* (1963-1991), Olmedo and his writers created "el Yeneral González," an Operation UNITAS[106] observer. Hugo Sofovich (Sofovich et al. 42) describes one sketch in which Olmedo's character meets with British and US officers. While the others synchronize their watches, González discovers his does not work and spends the rest of the sketch thumping it in vain; they show medals from Korea and Guadalcanal and he displays one from the Sailing Club of Rosario; when they ask his opinion on the military exercise to be undertaken, he says (in English) "The teacher and the pupil, the dog is black, the cat is red." As Sofovich goes on to detail, though the country was at the time in the midst of dictatorship, and though there was even a prominent general of the time who looked like "el Yeneral," these sketches had no issue with censorship; to the contrary, military men of the time even engaged in good-natured ribbing by calling each other "Yeneral González."

Thus, for the time being at least, despite glimmers of promising obscenity, Olmedo's improvisational, technical, and meta-textual prowess would be employed mainly in the production of contents that, like contemporaneous programming of the time, tended to isolate physical from political humor, as well as to keep each of these sorts within the bounds enforced by the fairly strict censorship of the times. Meanwhile, the benevolence with which the so-called Revolución Argentina viewed his "Yeneral"

[106] These recurring naval exercises, uniting US and Latin American forces, began in 1960 with the objective of building anti-Soviet defenses in the region.

sketches may have been an early experience suggesting the futility of political commentary based on less than scathing caricature.

Political Statement as Disappearing Act

Olmedo did, however, fall victim to some government censorship during the so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976-1983), and the circumstances surrounding this incident deserve some description, as they serve to illustrate both the anti-establishment challenge he posed and the limitations of this challenge.

In a manner perhaps typical of artistic endeavor in times of propagandistic autocracy, the expressions of Olmedo and his professional associates just prior to and during Argentina's latest and most virulent military dictatorship exhibit a rich polysemy. In this way, they were able to reflect and contest both the superficial, official reality as well as the deeper, more horrific truth that lay beneath.

From its beginning, the junta engaged in a politics of prevarication and propaganda that, in addition to grossly underreporting the extent of the atrocities committed,[107] also did its best to keep citizens in the dark regarding the true reasons behind the repression. In his book, *Los años setenta de la gente común,* Sebastián Carassai shows how media control during this time was used to lead a majority of Argentinians to believe that the actions of the military were justified as a means of

[107] As David Rock (384) reports, though the number of civilians killed or "disappeared" by the regime was actually between 10,000 and 30,000, "as late as 8 June 1982" officials were "blandly restating the government's standard line: Of some 8,700 persons arrested since 1976, almost 7,000 had been released, and a mere 475 remained in prison. The rest had either left the country, or remained under house arrest."

restoring order to a society whose very foundations were threatened by wild-eyed communist terrorists.[108]

While it is true that a few leftist groups like the Montoneros had committed some very visible acts of defiance, such as the kidnapping and execution of ex-president Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, these were small groups who were easily assassinated or otherwise dispersed shortly after the military took over the government on March 24, 1976. As David Rock and others have shown, state violence really ended up principally targeting "corporate associations led by the unions" (Rock 376), as these sectors were the ones who otherwise could have mounted the most resistance to José A. Martínez de Hoz' economic restructuring.[109]

Television production, meanwhile, was one of the local urban industries that fell victim to the new economic policy accompanying what President Jorge Rafael Videla blandly described as "the closing of one historical cycle and the beginning of another" (Rock 368). Here too, the junta's course of procedure relied upon a series of prevarications. No doubt, there was some truth to the official accusations of

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[108] It is interesting to note, in the context of the present analysis, that one program identified by Carassai as fulfilling this role was the *telenovela Rolando Rivas, taxista* (1972-1973), which contrasts the workaday reliability and generosity of the program's eponymous protagonist with the laziness and egotism of his effete brother Quique, a *guerrillero*.

[109] As Minister of the Economy, Martínez de Hoz embarked upon a dismantlement of urban industry, favoring instead the agricultural export sector run by the old landed oligarchy of which he himself was a member (Rock 368). These transformations would eventually benefit only the very rich, to the detriment of the poor as well as to most of the middle class, such that "urban society's relatively open and egalitarian character would become more dualistic, more like the rest of Latin America and the rest of the underdeveloped world" (Rock 370). While an early influx of foreign investment capital and cheap imports helped keep the middle classes temporarily pacified, the military carried out its brutal and terrifying elimination of unionists under the guise of a war on communism. Ironically, one of the principal reasons for Perón's initial foundation of the union structure and for the maintenance of unions in subsequent years was to keep the country from falling sway to the communists, confined instead within the bounds of corporatist capitalism.

mismanagement given as partial excuse for the junta's takeover of private channels 9, 11, and 13. However, the supposed solution to this problem, which involved putting each channel directly under the control of a branch of the armed forces, only accentuated the industry's financial and artistic decline.

Nora Mazziotti (1996) asserts this decay was not just the result of the new directors' ineptness, but was also purposeful. She suggests in fact that TV may have borne more than its share of the brunt of the junta's plan to "desterrar la industria nacional," as during the dictatorship "fenómenos masivos eran observados con sospecha" (86). Mass media apparently had too much potential to vocalize dissent.

One of the chief methods by which television's new directors dissembled their destructive intent consisted of the enforcement of crippling new codes of morality, decency, and patriotism. To be sure, the bowdlerization of Argentinian media was nothing new, but the wave of censorship set loose under Videla's watch made previous years look positively laissez-faire. To such an extent was this the case, for example, that in 1981, Héctor Maselli, writer and director of TV comedy, could say "La gente conoció una televisión argentina adulta, seria, en pleno crecimiento, y ahora estamos en una etapa de televisión blanca, tipo Cenicienta" (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 396).

This repression rendered the medium practically unworkable for many writers and other artists, for any content approved by the overseers would inevitably be insufferably dull and stodgy, leading audiences to begin to favor the foreign *enlatados,* which as Mazziotti (81) and Ulanovsky, Itkin and Sirvén (361, 400) report, were not subject to the same standards as local programming. Even *telenovela,* which like sitcom has a format

that can easily lend itself to collaboration with hegemonic discourse, suffered under the new regime. In 1979 notable *telenovelista* Abel Santa Cruz complained about the restrictions: "Hay pautas severísimas dentro de las cuales estamos totalmente limitados. Los temas son muy contados: es la muchacha buena y el muchacho bueno, nada más" (Ulanovsky, Itkin and Sirvén 375).

As Marino and Potolski detail, due to disagreements over to what extent the media should be privatized, the new restrictive codes were not written into law until March of 1980, with the *Decreto-Ley de Radiodifusión 22.285,* but like many other facets of the junta's administration, they went into de facto effect from the beginning of the dictatorship.[110] Thus, the stipulations of this law, requiring the media to omit for example "todo contenido que presente el triunfo del mal sobre el bien o que incluya expresiones lascivas de perversión sexual" and to "destacar la trascendencia de la unidad familiar como célula básica de la familia cristiana" (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 400), effectively had already been strictly enforced since March 24, 1976.[111]

One can only imagine the difficulties the new regulations posed for a comedian like Olmedo, who relied upon sexually-charged humor and, just as importantly, upon a certain autonomy within which to develop his improvisational practices. I thus submit that the stunt he pulled barely a month after the junta took control, on the day *El chupete* made its season debut, anxiously awaited by a populous audience, was an eloquent

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[110] "En la madrugada del golpe fueron convocados todos los directores de los medios de difusión metropolitanos a la sede del Comando General del Ejército, donde se les informó la decisión de implantar un régimen de censura 'que podía ser largo'" (Marino and Postolski 8).
[111] In fact, paradoxically, Marino and Potolski (9) report that the most repressive censorship occurred before the law was passed, between 1976-1980.

expression of his own predicament as cultural producer, as well as an effective way of protesting against the new regime.

This simple procedure consisted of beginning of the show with an announcement to the effect that Olmedo had “disappeared.” As Ulanovsky, Sirvén, and Itkin (353) note, the word “muerto” never was used in this announcement, which instead employed the already socially charged “desaparecido.” Though the actor nevertheless made his appearance on this show, giving the lie to the announcement, the few minutes of intervening confusion gave rise to widespread public consternation and the repetition on TV and radio of the false information.

First, and perhaps most obviously for those with historical hindsight, this disappearance seems to describe Olmedo’s personal artistic situation under the strict new codes which effectively silenced or erased his adult humor, leaving open to him only the infantile antics of Capitán Piluso, at a time when this impersonation of this character was beginning to make him feel “como un fracasado y lleno de culpas por seguir haciéndolo” (Tizziani 120). Secondly, while his own explanation of the disappearing act avoided direct confrontation with official dictum, it pointed toward the deeper industrial effects of the new system; at the time, Olmedo claimed apologetically that said act had been a publicity stunt aimed at reversing *El chupete’s* losing ratings battle against its foreign time-slot competitor, *The Pink Panther*. One can only suppose that, typifying the situation of much local production at the time, *El chupete’s* difficulties in competing with an *enlatado* were doubled by the new restrictions, which would have placed a taboo upon even such relatively innocent programming as the *gondolero* sketch.

Besides indicating a response to his own individual predicament as comedian, as well as to that of local television and other industry in general, we can also read Olmedo's disappearing act as a way to confront even the darkest realities of the dictatorship. Since 1973, the paramilitary Alianza Anticomunista Argentina had been carrying out attacks against labor leaders and other individuals with alleged associations to leftist agitators. Often these victims were simply "disappeared," with no trace left of their existence. In this sense, the cleverness of Olmedo's trick lay in the fact that any government reaction or non-reaction was doomed to fail. If officials ignored the prank it would send the message that such hijinks would be tolerated in the future. On the other hand, harsh sanctions would amount to a tacit admission of the reality of the *desaparecidos,* when official policy even as late as 1983 consisted of flat-out denial that any such disappearances had occurred. Perhaps predictably, the COMFER decided on a middle-of-the-road approach, fining Canal 13 and several of the individuals involved and removing *El chupete* from the air. Olmedo did not return to television until 1978.

However, one also senses multiple resonances deriving from the fact that Olmedo's most overtly *political* act of rebellion consisted of a *disappearance*. With a few exceptions, his most famous television work would shy away from directly engaging current political figures and events. Perhaps this refusal stemmed from an understandable survival instinct, or from the comedian's maintenance of a certain class consciousness that consciously situates itself as inferior to the upper levels of political management as well as intimating the impression that, as with Minguito Tinguitella, high-level politics is somehow beneath *oneself*. Finally, our list of overdetermining factors should include the

possibility that official reactions to the “Yeneral González” and similar sketches convinced Olmedo et al. of the relative futility of any direct engagement that didn’t take caricatures well beyond the imposed limits. In any case, the result was a certain invisibility or intangibility of current *political reality* (sensu stricto) whose lack of presence would continue to haunt Olmedo’s later work as well as a good deal of sketch production in the years after his death.

TALK THE TALK, AND DRIBBLE THE DRIBBLE: LOS FIERECILLOS INDOMABLES *(1982)*

Representations of sexuality in and of themselves, however, can also be politically charged, perhaps especially during times when laws and mores in operation place strict controls upon both representations and social reality. During the *Proceso,* religious dogma served those in power with an excuse to claim totalitarian control over citizens’ bodies. Any sex acts foreign to that “célula básica” of sociedad, “la familia cristiana,” were thus regarded as criminal. Olmedo, who began his performing career as an acrobat and who as a youngster seriously considered the idea of becoming a professional athlete or a dancer, who gave himself up regularly to the excesses of nightlife but who also made an effort to keep himself fit, placed an emphasis on physicality in his day-to-day life and in his comedy, and he likely resented the new corporal restrictions on a personal as well as on a professional level.

Meanwhile, as a child and adolescent in Pichincha, a Rosario barrio known for its history of prostitution, Olmedo grew up in an atmosphere “permeado por relatos de

antiguas hazañas sexuales, recuerdos de matones, cafishios, grelas…" (Tizziani 11). Here, during a time of expansive class solidarity, it is unlikely the young man would have adopted the sort of restrictive bourgeois code advocated (though not practiced) by Perón himself and later, more forcefully, by the *Proceso*. Effectively, rather than see sexuality as a property to be contained within the "célula básica" of church-sanctioned marriage, he seems to have come to an understanding of it as a multivalent factor that despite its protean characteristics usually tended, like friendship, to draw people together, possibly upending social hierarchies in the process.

It was natural, then, for Olmedo to base his efforts of resistance to established order upon a vision of redemption through various modes of interpersonal solidarity, with special emphasis on a liberated or "carnivalized" sexuality. Appropriately, actress and singer Divina Gloria reinforces this impression of Olmedo's sexuality as somehow holy or visionary: "Era un seductor total, no sólo con las chicas; tenía un gran sex appeal con todo el mundo, con las mujeres, los animalitos, los hombres, una especie de *aura*" (74, italics mine). As a spirit of resistance, it would be difficult for this *aura* to project itself fully onto tightly-controlled pre-1983 TV screens.

However, during the period 1980-1983, within which one may note the beginnings of a "quiebre del discurso monolítico de la dictadura" (Marino and Potolski 9), cinematic controls seem to have eased up some, to the extent that "el Negro" and longtime collaborator Jorge Porcel would make, in 1982, a movie that quite clearly voices Olmedo's brand of "heretical challenge." Though not technically *sketch* comedy, *Los fierecillos indomables* sums up Olmedo's philosophy of sexuality and solidarity to

such an extent that discussion of this movie is indispensable to an understanding of his later televisual work.

Both Olmedo's real character and the one(s) he portrayed on television emitted a kind of semiological solvent, eroding rigidly symbolic, hermetic dispositions that would seal up individual characters, professions, and social classes against contamination from without. Meanwhile, the resemblances between his roles as social and screen actor similarly erode the bounds between reality and the oneiric possibilities of fiction. Watching Olmedo, one witnesses the creation of a kind of auto-fictionality in resonance with popular ideals. Though this carnivalesque disposition, like that of the protesters who descended upon the city center to demand the release of Juan Perón in 1955, may be described as largely chaotic, apolitical or even anarchic, yet in times of duress its inherent solidarity may be activated to achieve a common goal.

The year 1981 painted just such a desperate sociopolitical landscape, as the junta fought to maintain control despite the country's dire economic circumstances coupled with growing public awareness of the extent of the atrocities committed during the first years of the dictatorship. On one hand, *Los fierecillos indomables,* released the following year, was just another buddy flick, heavy on the slapstick humor, in a long line of such movies that Olmedo made with fellow comedian Jorge Porcel. On the other hand, the makers of this movie, provoked by years of oppression and stimulated by the beginnings of a fissure in the wall of censorship, demonstrate an unusual willingness to engage in political critique.

Critics and fans often lament Olmedo's decision to make *Los fierecillos,* wishing he had instead accepted Fernando Ayala's and Juan José Jusid's offer of a leading role in their eventually critically-acclaimed work, *Plata dulce* (1982).[112] This attitude is imminently and unintentionally ironic, for just as *Los fierecillos* may represent the most successful wedding of Olmedo's sociocultural vision with political expression, at the same time showing the rootedness of this vision in local cultural production, the decision to work on *Los fierecillos* instead of the more "serious" *Plata dulce* reflects the comedian's commitment to living out, as a social actor, the same principle of solidarity that he advocates on both big and small screens.

Plata dulce tells the not implausible tale of two brothers-in-law, Carlos and Rubén (Federico Luppi and Julio De Grazia) who work together as co-owners of a furniture store, when Carlos allows himself to be drawn into the flurry of speculation set off by the economic liberalization instated by the military regime at the behest of international lending organizations. He sells off his part in the business to join up with a dubious speculative enterprise and his initial financial gains fuel his greed and cause him to over-commit to his new unscrupulous boss, who eventually flees the country with the company holdings. The end of the movie finds Carlos in jail for fraud and both brothers-in-law broke, as Rubén, abandoned by his kinsman and associate, has not been able to maintain the business when cheap imports, liberated from tariffs, began flooding the market.

[112] Javier Portales' statement describes the general sentiment: "Pienso que fue una pena, una buena oportunidad perdida" (Sofovich et al. 131).

Olmedo refused to play the part of Carlos because he had already planned to film another movie that year with longtime partner Jorge Porcel. Porcel was not invited to take part in the making of *Plata Dulce,* and Olmedo didn't feel it would be fair to forsake his friend. In other words, this refusal amounted to a rejection of precisely the sort of social maneuvering displayed by Luppi's uppity character in *Plata Dulce*—except that Olmedo wouldn't have been risking his *own* neck so foolishly, as a movie by Ayala and Jusid was unlikely to fail either in the box office or in the eyes of critics.[113]

Appropriately, in contrast to *Plata dulce,* which engages in the perhaps necessary retrospective work of showing to what extent the dictatorship relied upon divisiveness inherent to the Argentinian body politic, *Los fierecillos* looks forward to a less oppressive future whose realization depends upon solidarity, local expression, and social liberalization. Furthermore, rather than engage in sententious depictions of what cinema producers assume to be social reality, *Los fierecillos* uses its metaphorical setting, the fictitious Colegio Artístico Cultural Hispanoamericano de Adultos, to explore what directors and cast—made up primarily of TV actors—know best: the realm of cultural production.

The institution's acronym, CACHADA, informs the audience from the beginning of the movie's burlesque nature. Olmedo plays the headmaster of the Buenos Aires branch. His character, "Alberto Videla," recalls the system of nomenclature used by Pepe Biondi, whose personae often received the actor's first name followed by a last name denotative of character (Pepe Curdeles, Pepe Malevaje, Pepe Metralla, etc.). Here,

[113] In fact, this movie garnered the *Condor de Plata* prize for best film in 1983.

"Alberto Videla" almost certainly refers to Jorge Rafael Videla, president of the nation from 1976-1981 when the worst of the *Proceso's* atrocities were committed, and ratifier of the newest, to-date most restrictive *Ley de Radiodifusión* (22.285).

Like J.R. Videla, Olmedo's character presides, or attempts to preside, with an iron fist over an area of cultural production in which adults are treated like children.[114] At the beginning of the movie, he is an emotionally stunted man, apparently immune to affect, whose only concern is that his program should pass muster under the stern gaze of the pretentious Dr. Piedrabuena (Javier Portales), who visits the Buenos Aires branch of CACHADA as part of a continent-wide tour of inspection.[115]

However, both men have to contend with the unruly student body, comprising individuals with undeniable creative ability but little inclination to apply themselves to the high, dry arts prescribed by the school's directors. The movie's opening scene, in which an airborne Piedrabuena comments to a stewardess that he is anxiously awaiting the "surprises" that Buenos Aires has to offer him, cuts directly to a drag act in which one of the school's students performs Raffaella Carrà's gay anthem "Hay que venir al sur."

This performance sets the tone for a wealth of variety- and *revista*-like acts perpetrated by the Colegio's students throughout the movie, including the following: another drag show (Jorge Porcel impersonating María Martha Serra Lima); Serra Lima herself, providing a rare moment of pathos with José José's "Amor, Amor;" a modernized version of "Siglo veinte cambalache" that ends, "ya lo único que falta es que

[114] Obviously, many of the day's television comics would have identified all too keenly with this situation.
[115] Interestingly, CACHADA has schools throughout Latin America and Dr. Piedrabuena says that he is "muy satisfecho con los resultados obtenidos en Rio de Janeiro," where he has been most recently.

Menotti[116] se presente a presidente de la nación;" Mario Sapag's impression of Jorge Luis Borges that had been banned from the television the same year *Los fierecillos* was released (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 410); and a piece that ascends boldly into pure absurdity with an Elvis impersonator who writhes regally to the tune of "Tengo hormigas en mis calzones." As it turns out, the students regularly sneak out of their dorm rooms to go perform at a nearby nightclub.

These monkeyshines are accentuated by the arrival of Porcel's Pantagruelian personage, who initially allows himself to be confused with the awaited inspector, Piedrabuena. Discovered, Porcel explains, probably lying, that he has been responding to the name Piedrabuena because his own is *Pietra*buena. This only serves to mark the contrast between the inspector's air of *cristiano viejo*—Castilian accent included—and Porcel's hybridized *criollo* persona. "Pietrabuena's" effrontery, combined with the students' other transgressions, triggers a proclamation, delivered by Piedrabuena and Videla, to the effect that the Colegio will be shut down if certain acts of repentance are not carried out. Chief amongst these is the cessation of romantic encounters between students, as "el hecho de que este establecimiento sea mixto ha provocado que el alumnado se dedique más a las aficiones sentimentales y a la diversión que al estudio." Here one cannot help but hear echoes of the new *Ley de Radiodifusión*.

However, it soon becomes clear that what needs revision is not so much the protagonists' instincts as the concept of good and evil imposed upon them, as all the principal characters—not just Pietrabuena, but Piedrabuena and even Videla—eventually

[116] César Luis Menotti coached the Argentinian soccer team to a World Cup title in 1978, giving the military junta an early feather in its cap and bolstering the regime's spurious proclamations of patriotism.

give in to their romantic and sexual impulses, and far from bringing disaster, this ends up being what saves the school from extinction. Having failed all other tests imposed by the inspector, the Colegio finds its survival now dependent upon a soccer match against “Loma Blanca,” a professional team whose name recalls that of Loma Negra, owned by Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, one of Argentina’s richest people and one of the chief beneficiaries of the new economic policies instated by the dictatorship (Roesler).

At first the school team, led by the silly duo Videla / Pietrabuena, does miserably, but after headmaster (Olmedo) and class clown (Porcel) drink from a mysterious brown bottle administered by their girlfriends Vanina and María Luz (played by the two seasoned *revista vedettes* Luisa Albinoni and Susana Traverso, respectively), they acquire superhuman strength and easily defeat their professional competitors. Just before the game’s inevitable final, a close-up shows the label on the mysterious bottle, which reads “Unimento,” apparently a portmanteau word combining *unidad* and *pegamento*.

Extending the portmanteau concept into metaphor, I submit that the final scene, in which Videla and “Pietrabuena”—now diegetic as well as extra-diegetic friends—are carried off the field on the arms of their adoring teammates and fans, with the CACHADA flag flying victorious overhead, deploys the following bisemy: 1) The scene can function as social satire parodying the celebration of Argentina’s victory in the 1978 World Cup (a sports victory used to bolster the reputation of a *joke* of an administration). 2) We can also see here the transmission of a literal message, spelled out in the word *unimento*. This terse proclamation finds a general source of redemption, and one that might be applied to Argentina’s current predicament, in the social glue of the nation.

Unimento must be a messy liquid consisting—I venture to guess—not only of farm and factory workers' sweat, but of that of drag queens and women of the night, as well as of seminal fluids and other unmentionables that find no place in *serious* texts like *La comunidad organizada,* nor even in acclaimed dramedies like *Plata dulce*. However, *unimento* saturates *Los fierecillos indomables*—not just in the story the movie tells, but in the story of the movie's making and in the way its content is structured. Olmedo's decision to participate in *Los fierecillos* not only facilitated the continuation of his friend Porcel's career, but helped create a movie whose message of unity is delivered in a way that hearkens back to a long Argentinian tradition of popular performance.

Vox Populi Revivit: Thus David Rock titles the section of his book describing the final months of the *Proceso*, when the military lost the last vestiges of public support and was forced to start down the path toward withdrawal from government control. The country now found itself in undeniable economic decline, and the embarrassing mismanagement of the Malvinas War discredited the military even further. Meanwhile, Rock credits groups such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and individuals like internationally-renowned artist and activist Adolfo Pérez Esquivel with voicing the details of the *guerra sucia* abroad, bringing international pressure into the push for regime change. While acknowledging the obvious need for acknowledgement abroad of the atrocities committed,[117] I suggest that in 1982 Argentinians also needed to laugh, love, and feel a sense of positive unity despite the wrenching realities of the past six years. Thus, the *revival of popular voice* also received its strength, perhaps, from silly and

[117] As Patrice McSherry (2005) reports, the international aspect of these atrocities as part of the U.S.-organized Operation Condor did not figure into this initial acknowledgement.

salacious expressions of *unimento,* especially when these expressions were channeled through the reactivation of long suppressed or repressed forms of enunciation. As we have seen, *Los fierecillos'* achievement of this call to disorder was even coupled with a certain degree of direct political engagement.

Small-Screen Unimento: ¡No toca botón!

On television, Olmedo's post-dictatorship outburst of creativity would be channelled primarily into Canal 11's *¡No toca botón!* Since here Olmedo generally avoided direct political commentary of the type we have identified in *Los fierecillos*, which remains an exception within the larger body of his work, it could be argued that this program represents a continuation of the long-standing trend in electronic mass media toward the isolation of bawdy, physical humor from political criticism. On the other hand, the range and intensity of the sexual humor displayed here goes far beyond anything ever before witnessed on Argentinian television.

Thus, this bawdy material itself could certainly be taken as an indirect, after-the-fact challenge to the repressive military regime, as well as to contemporary social and political atavisms hearkening back to those oppressive years and beyond.[118] More directly, in some ways heavily reminiscent of sketch comedy's *raíces revisteriles*, *¡No toca botón!* uses sexuality to address current socioeconomic issues. However, as we will

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[118] Substantiating this claim, underground theater comedian María José Gabin writes that her own sexually-oriented humor of the 1980s and early 1990s was directed toward healing collective neuroses created or intensified during the years of the dictatorship.

see, this program also takes its exploration of extramarital sex into realms never traversed by early *revista,* allowing for a corresponding deepening of its socioeconomic analysis.

Such analysis was nothing if not timely for, post-traumatic social disorders aside, the country's most pressing problems of the 1980s were economic in nature. Though Alfonsín initially raised wages and maintained government employment, after just a year spiraling inflation and rocketing foreign debt, fueled by high interest rates in the US, could no longer be ignored (Rock 398). A resultant deal with the IMF pushed economic policy back to a state that Rock compares with Celestino Rodrigo's infamous 1975 austerity plan, and as part of this policy "the Alfonsín government became an increasingly enthusiastic convert to privatization schemes" (Rock 398). In other words, though progress had been made on the human-rights front, the country found itself in an economic situation not very different from the one serving as historical context for the movie *Plata dulce*, except that there was maybe even less sweet cashflow to be filtered out by crafty white-collar negotiators.

Effectively, Mercedes Moglia provides a concise description of the comedian's groundbreaking TV work of the 1980s, writing that "Olmedo se consolidó en la ejecución de personajes cómicos en el marco de cierto ideario de *teatro de revista,* de un humor ligado al doble sentido sexual" (Moglia 2012: 10, italics mine). However, though she also notes that these comical situations focus on extramarital affairs that generally end up frustrated, often due to economic insufficiencies, for her the impact of *¡No toca botón!* is almost exclusively sexual, as "las pillerías de Olmedo funcionaron en un momento en que

el destape insinuante del elenco femenino, sólo en su cercanía con momentos represivos y oscurantistas de la cultura nacional, podía contener cierto rasgo de liberación" (11).

As I suggested in my first chapter, it would be shortsighted—especially given certain sociopolitical situations—to attribute the draw of this sort of humor simply to the piqued prurience of repressed audiences. Rather, we should consider the relationship between sex, money, and power. Like early *revistas,*—notably, Enrique Buttaro's *Revista nacional* (1903)—and like more recent ones—e.g., the *revista* depicted in the movie *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* (1956)—the series of frustrated trysts shown on Olmedo's programs represents a refusal to adopt a money-blind bourgeois attitude toward sexual union (i.e., "love is all that matters," a sentiment that can only be completely true in the case of those for whom money is no object). Likewise, it refuses to validate the current economic system by portraying officially sanctioned exchanges of women (i.e., marriage) or un-problematized depictions of the relationships resulting from such unions.

A description of the "Empleado Pérez" sketches on *¡No toca botón!* will allow us to begin to see how the program employed this time-honored *revista* trope. The scripts do not specify exactly what business is done in this office-place setting where Javier Portales plays the boss, Silvia Pérez his secretary and lover, and Olmedo (the eponymous "empleado Pérez") and César Bertrand, the underlings. However, one can easily imagine that the action takes place in a former state-run office now subject to the savage capitalism imposed by the new IMF deal. None of the characters appears to be particularly well-off, a situation emphasized by the fact that the boss is the only one with the means to maintain an illicit affair. However, even his funds barely suffice to sustain a

sputtering adulterous flame, as it comes to light, for example, that the couple have no love nest of their own, but instead have been meeting at one of the *telos*[119] out along the Pan American Highway.

As we have seen, in old popular theater like *Revista nacional* (1903), this sort of sexual humor disabuses audiences of interlocking naturalizations of capitalism and patriarchy that cast men exclusively in the role of providers and members of the workplace, and women as homebodies who "don't work"—i.e., whose home-based labor is not recognized as such—a common oversight that no doubt contributes significantly to the production of surplus value. Like her *revista* forebears, Silvia Pérez' secretary is not doomed to the happy consciousness of bourgeois wife and mother, but instead enters into the workplace with a sharp-edged self awareness and a sense of economic practicality. However, the "Empleado Pérez" sketches take this trope to a new level, as here the secretary not only uses her wherewithal to defend her own interests, but also to dominate everyone else in the office.

As part of her affirmation of Olmedo's *machismo,* Mercedes Moglia (2008) describes the comedian as an "exaltador del trabajo sexual femenino" (10). While it would certainly not be inappropriate to characterize the work done by Pérez' character in these sketches as at least partially sexual in nature, we should also acknowledge that within the space of the office, this work places her practically, if not officially, at the top of the chain of command, with Olmedo's character at the bottom. Her demands upon the boss are inevitably transferred to his inferiors, who with the promise of a promotion as

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[119] *Vesre* for *hotel*, a *telo* is inn that rents rooms by the hour, intended specifically for the use given it by the characters in this sketch.

their carrot, engage in a mad scramble to fulfill these behests. Inevitably “el Empleado Pérez,” proves more astute, and it is he who succeeds in acquiring the requested item, though at the cost of great personal sacrifice.

On one occasion (“El empleado Pérez 01”), the secretary has declared she must have a telephone, and Olmedo’s character ends up ceding his own; the sketch ends with the underling having to use a carrier pigeon to send notice that he and his wife will be showing up at his mother-in-law’s house for Sunday dinner.

In another such sketch (“El empleado Pérez 02”), Silvia Pérez’ character declares she will no longer settle for clandestine meetings at the *telo,* and that the boss must secure a permanent “nido de amor.” When he discovers the boss’ new predicament, Olmedo’s character astutely claims that he has just such a *bulín* and would be willing to share it. The final scene has the lovebirds entering this apartment and heading off immediately for the bedroom. “Tiene calor de hogar,” the secretary happily affirms of the place.

We soon find out this statement is more correct than she knows, as the camera pans slowly to show the minion, his wife, and their two babies stealthily coming into the living room from the kitchen where they have been hiding. “¿Tardarán mucho?” the wife asks. “Quizás un par de horas,” Olmedo’s character replies; “dale pecho al niño, así no llora.” Here, then, we find an exposure of the current economic situation, whose penury has intruded into the homes even of the very class whose comfortable lifestyles, in other countries, can be held up as a success of the capitalist system. Concomitant with this economic disillusionment, these sketches suggest, is a dismantlement of patriarchal

hierarchy that would place men in the position of benevolent sovereign, both at home and in the workplace.

As we will see, the irreverent treatment of patriarchy in the "Empleado Pérez" sketches take this idea far beyond its realization in early *revista*, not only granting female characters greater power, but calling into question its male characters' sexual identities. Here too, economics come into play. The most bourgeois character, the boss played by Portales, marches in desperate lockstep with heterosexual masculine *habitus,* with the resultant repression often leading to embarrassing neurotic behavior. Meanwhile, Olmedo's character, though just an office hack, displays a certain sense of working-class *unimento* and an attendant pansexuality.

Though the boss, played by Portales, superficially exhibits what might traditionally be assumed to be the most macho of behaviors through his philandering and by exercising de jure, if not de facto, control over the workplace, this machismo is continually undercut by conversations in which he and Olmedo's character engage in racy double-entendre. Generally, the trigger for this sort of play consists of the boss' entering the office dressed in partial drag—wearing, for example, a large clip-on earring and a woman's fur coat with leopard-print cuffs and collar. In keeping with what might be a repressed homosexual identity, he always claims to have no idea how he came to be wearing these items, at which point Olmedo, always the astute underling, attempts to convince him that there is nothing unusual at all in this garb and that he should not think twice even about wearing it out on the street.

The boss then expresses consternation at this idea and asks if Olmedo himself has ever done such a thing, to which the latter man replies suggestively, "Éramos tan pobres…" Portales' character then communicates his confusion as to what might be the connection between poverty and cross-dressing, at which point Olmedo proffers utilitarian explanations ranging in nature from the logical—when one is poor one wears any kind of coat one can get—to the frankly absurd—e.g., he used to use a brassiere to hold newspapers against his chest so as to protect himself from the cold while riding a bicycle.

These conversations inevitably lead to undeniable homosexual double-entendre, as when for example, continuing his enumeration of the hardships of poverty, Olmedo says with a sideways wink at the camera, "Teníamos tanta hambre que nos llevábamos cualquier cosa a la boca." Just in case anyone has missed this innuendo, the pair reinforce it toward the end of the sketch, when Olmedo wants to ask the boss a favor and to emphasize his supplication gets down on his knees in front of the other man, at which the latter says "No, no, de rodillas no, porque después dice 'éramos tan pobres' y…"

Despite his show of resistance, this particular sketch ends with the boss expressing his gratitude for Olmedo's services by grabbing him, looking passionately into his eyes—"sus ojos dicen que sí," Olmedo meanwhile quips—and giving him a long kiss. Though the kiss is administered, in proper male heterosexual Argentinian fashion, to the cheek, Olmedo's character, inflamed, reacts by saying "si lo vamos a hacer así, vamos a hacerlo bien," then donning the fur coat and wig the boss has discarded and throwing himself at the other man, only to be once again rebuffed by the repressed boss.

Besides contradicting allegations against Olmedo of machismo, such as that leveled by Moglia's otherwise interesting article, the use of the phrase "éramos tan pobres" as an explanation for homosexual and / or gender-bending activities adds a socioeconomic dimension to Olmedo's carnivalesque style—one that avoids the familiar association of progressive thinking with bourgeois idealism, instead situating sexual and gender ambiguity solidly amongst the common folk. Adding to the sense of a blurring of the boundaries of social distinction that accompanied the original, popular, quasi-Peronism, these sketches bring the same spirit to the territory of sex and gender.

Ulanovsky et al. cite the phrase "Éramos tan pobres" in its list of "Frases dichas en la tele durante esta década (the 1980s) y que quedaron para siempre" (486).[120] This public reception signals a willingness to consider adding a new dimension to what Matthew Karush identifies as a decades-old theme in popular cultural production: the snobbish, selfish, socially dysfunctional rich, in comparison with the solidarity of the poor. "Éramos tan pobres" indicates this solidarity does not root itself solely in questions of money, morale, and cultural expression; rather, its encouragement of social fluidity also depends upon opening the floodgates of sexuality. By contrast, and like other bourgeois characters in *¡No toca botón!*—some played, interestingly, by Olmedo

[120] Reminiscent of theorists cited by Eve Sedgwick whose analyses of sexuality "sublimate the quicksilver of sex itself," Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén also use "Éramos tan pobres" as the title of their chapter describing the television of 1981, here only referring to the small screen's economic woes, as "Las reservas de los canales han sido prácticamente dilapidadas en inversiones que no arrojaron rentabilidad" (395). However, some evidence exists that the bi-dimensionality of this saying (money *and* sexuality / gender) was far from entirely lost upon the general populace. The popular miniseries *Tumberos* (2002), for example, includes a scene in which a group of prisoners stand around conversing and one of them implies that another likes to have sex with transsexuals, to which the latter replies "Éramos tan pobres…"

himself—Portales' boss cannot conceive of a sexual freedom that would go beyond the having of a single, heterosexual, extramarital affair.

Even these bourgeois characters' inevitably clumsy trespasses in the end only show to what extent they remain animated primarily by slavish devotion to moral codes such as those prescribed by the recent dictatorship. Such codes, which for the monied classes have the benefit of conserving (patrimonial) lines of inheritance, for those who have no riches to pass down only impose unnecessary restrictions on the various ways in which sexuality may enhance sociability and solidarity.

Thus, in an economic environment like 1980s Argentina, in which the middle class is steadily dwindling, the office boss in *¡No toca botón!,* with his stiff, hypocritical sense of propriety and his obsessive, often thwarted pursuit of the secretary, may remind us of Bergson's statements regarding the puppet-like nature of physical comedy: "Les attitudes, gestes et mouvements du corps humain sont risibles dans l'exact mesure où ce corps nous fait penser à un simple mécanique" (21). As Bergson goes on to detail, this is in fact one of the ways humor serves to elicit communal evolution; by making fun of mechanical repetitions of outmoded patterns of behavior, such humor encourages recognition of, and adaptation to, new social realities. Meanwhile, Olmedo himself, with what Divina Gloria describes as his pansexual "aura," acts as the foil for these sorts of characters, thereby offering up a different and perhaps increasingly more valid model of sexual sociability.

Shrinks, Sorcerers, and the Magic of Self-Deprecation

Unlike the religious fundamentalisms of our own time, Olmedo's doctrine—if I may use such a word—of sexual liberation contains an inherent levity which keeps it from thwarting its own message of salvation with earthbound self-seriousness.

Accordingly, much of Olmedo's late sketch work dedicates itself to caricaturing precisely the aura of sexuality exuded by the comedian himself.[121] Two classes of these sketches merit special mention here because of their diachronic relevancy. The 1980s brought nominal democracy to Argentina and an end to most of the officially-sanctioned violence, but the country was subjected to neoliberal policies that lead to the dismantlement of national industry and increasing precarity amongst the workforce. As Thomas Alberts (2015) argues, neoliberal transformation hinges upon a naturalization of classical economic thought wherein "the starting point of economic analysis should not be the structure of economy, but the individual as economic agent" (179). Particularly in urban settings, people bereft of old structures of group identification such as strong, governmentally integrated unions and large extended families, looked to specialists who could "cure" them by helping them discover their identity and paving the way back to social inclusion.

As we have seen, since his artistic beginnings Olmedo's own professional activity can be described as patching together a social fabric always on the verge of disintegration. Even his lowly participation in the claque of Rosario's Teatro Comedia

[121] Olmedo's biographer Rubén Tizziani supports this claim: "En sus años de éxito se reía de sí mismo" (47).

was aimed at facilitating the synergy of theatrical action and audience reaction. Later, on TV and in movies like *Los fierecillos indomables,* he developed this unifying vocation, adding the elements of sexuality and laughter. But the sexual *aura* itself needed lampooning, and *¡No toca botón!* accomplished this by casting the comedian in two historically relevant roles: "El psicoanalista," and "El manosanta."

Argentina, commonly known as the most psychoanalyzed country in Latin America, has the highest per capita number in the world of practicing psychologists,[122] and in the ideological and social vacuum of the 1980s it was natural that this type of professional would acquire special relevance. Mirroring dominant discourses, the psychologist classically focuses on transformation of the individual to achieve social adaptation. In addition to its a priori acceptance of the social status quo, another dangerous aspect of this operation is the trust it places in the psychologists themselves. Olmedo's "psicoanalista" sketches emphasize this variable by depicting a professional who is crazier than all his clients. At the same time, they elaborate upon the Olmedian autofiction by poking fun at the comedian's own reliance on sexuality as social cure-all.

Perhaps tellingly, the bourgeois "psicoanalista" appears much less omnisexual and more repressed than his lower-class doppelgänger, the *manosanta*. These very Freudian sketches inevitably open with César Bertrand on the analyst's couch, prattling on about various and sundry inconsequentialities in a manner meant to seem effeminate and with a language rife with sexual—mainly phallic—double-entendre.[123] The shot then

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[122] See, for example, Landau (2013).
[123] A few examples: Speaking affectionately of his shop (*manualidades*) teacher, he says "fue el que me enseñó a agarrar las herramientas." He admits he likes ñoquis but prefers canalones. He says of a

pans or cuts to show the psychoanalyst asleep. When Bertrand's character realizes he has been talking only to himself, he wakes the analyst, who after giving him some summary advice on how to behave in more manly fashion and after taking his pay, promptly ushers him to the door.

The next scene shows the shrink with his secretary (Silvia Pérez), also his lover, as he affirms his love for her, offers to marry her, and so on, to keep her from leaving him in retribution for his various abuses. Just as she begins to acquiesce, the situation becomes more complicated when the real object of his obsession, a darker-haired patient usually played by Susana Traverso, appears on the scene. Abruptly, Olmedo's psychoanalyst begins to try at all costs to remove Pérez' character from the premises, shoving her toward the door and in extreme cases throttling her, throwing things at her and so on.

Once alone with Traverso, he passes off the prior violence as therapeutic "psychodrama" and the rest of the sketch depicts his lecherous advances on his patient. He tries to lie down with her when she reclines on the couch, then asks her to act out a recent dream, the fulfillment of this request invariably involving the removal of some of her clothing, repeated maulings at the hands of her therapist, and a continuation of the priapic play on words initiated with Bertrand. The attempts at consummation inevitably fail and the patient leaves, the psychiatrist always exclaiming determinedly upon closing the door "¡A ésta le rompo el bloqueo!"

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shopkeeper he worked for "me enseñó a tirar los fideos sucios," and "nunca me atrajeron los fiambres hasta que probé el salame de don José" ("El psicoanalista").

If any charges of machismo might be levied against *!No toca botón!,* the "psicoanalista" would be a prime suspect. However, even in these sketches, one finds cracks in the phallic monolith. First, instead of automatically assuming the analyst's evident homophobia reveals a corresponding sentiment in Olmedo himself, we should place these sketches in context with others such as the office-place skits and those whose protagonist is the less affluent *manosanta*. Like that of Portales' office boss, the psychoanalyst's homophobia forms part of a particularly bourgeois sensibility that the *manosanta* does not express. Also, as in the case of the office sketches, we are given clues as to the repressive roots of this prejudice. Despite his apparent lack of interest in Bertrand's lisped monologues and his refusal to allow him to kiss him on the mouth when they part, the analyst can never resist giving his client a pinch on the behind as he goes out the door.

Also like Portales' relatively affluent office boss and unlike the *manosanta,* the psychoanalyst's macho attempts at seduction almost never yield results. In fact, this latter character's only apparent satisfactions occur when, after having been stimulated to a boiling point by Traverso's semi-nude reenactments, he disappears into the bathroom, within seconds reappearing with his right hand smoking. Not only in sexual matters, but also on personal and interpersonal levels, he is a *pajero,* or wanker (here we should keep in mind this word's attendant anti-virile connotations of *lazy* and *worthless*). Rather than effecting his clients' rehabilitation, he instead pursues, with reckless abandon, his own overwhelming obsession, itself perhaps only the result of a sublimation.

As such, “El psicoanalista” reminds us that despite the analyst’s privileged place in the discourse of the moment, he remains vulnerable to the very psychoses he claims to cure. Meanwhile, by casting Olmedo in the role of psychoanalyst, these sketches also function as a lampooning of the actor’s tendency to participate in works that seem obsessed with sexuality as social cure-all; especially to the extent that this sexuality might become associated with repressive attitudes of bourgeois respectability, it also has the capacity to alienate by exacerbating individual mania to the detriment of solidarity. By this time, it should be noted, Olmedo had achieved a modicum of financial stability in his personal life. Thus, his satirical treatment of bourgeois characters contains a certain air of self-referentiality.

However, while the relationship between the actor and “el psicólogo” may be described primarily as one of analogy, Olmedo’s ties to the *manosanta* are more synecdochal. At the same time, this cross between snake-oil salesman and *pai umbanda* also has a strong connection with the times, as he represents the magical alternative to the psychoanalyst’s more nominally scientific approach. The desired result of the treatment remains the same in both cases: a *cure* facilitating the happy re-entry of alienated individuals back into society. The sketch’s theme song advertises the *curandero’s* effectiveness in this regard: “El manosanta es un gran maestro. / Con sus poderes llegó del Brazil. / Él me ha curado de mi mala pata; / hoy tengo plata y soy feliz.” The lyrical narrator goes on to say that thanks to the *manosanta* he has found a good job and has plans to marry a television model.

Instead of psychological analysis the *manosanta* offers incantations uttered in hokey pseudo-Portuguese and the ubiquitous *gualichos*, or magical talismans, and his methods, as well as his motives, are similarly dubious. This shaman, who wears long hair, a red kimono, and a hippie bandana, has an extensive repertoire of childish jokes and tricks worthy of a circus clown, and his ultimate objective, besides that of relieving his visitors of their money, is to bed his young client, "la bebota," played by Adriana Brodsky.

Perhaps more than any other of his other sketches, this series allows Olmedo to develop a popular auto-fiction. Portales, who plays the father of "la bebota," always regards the phony medicine man skeptically and questions him regarding his identity. The details that subsequently come to light often coincide with the actor's own biography. Besides allowing for a certain play between reality and fiction, these conversations permit Olmedo to establish street cred. In one such exchange, for example, when the *manosanta* says "Eu sono portugués," Portales contradicts him: "No, vos sos santafesino, y para más datos, rosarino," then adding, como decís, rosarigasino" ("El Manosanta 01").

The two then banter for a moment in *gasó,* a sort of pig latin originally developed in Olmedo's hometown by prisoners to speak to each other without being understood by their jailers. They proceed to discuss another detail of the actor's biography, the fact that one of his childhood jobs was that of linotypist, with Portales moreover accusing him of habitually robbing lead from his employers and selling it in a scrapyard. Such discussions inevitably confirm the comedian's popular roots, at the same time probably stretching the

truth some—as when Portales says “tenés unas causas todavía abiertas”—to accentuate a romantic image of him as lawless bandit.

In light of the especially strong identification between the *manosanta* and Olmedo as social actor, it is interesting to consider the sexuality portrayed by these sketches in comparison with that of the psychoanalyst. While both suffer from sexual obsession and both focus on a woman as ultimate object of this obsession, the less bourgeois *manosanta* spreads his mania much more evenly than does his white-collar counterpart. Like the psychoanalyst, he maintains an intimate relationship with a female coworker, in this case his receptionist, played by celebrated *vedette* Beatriz Salomón. However, this affair remains amicably polyamorous and informal, never threatening to assume an officially-sanctioned nature, and Salomón’s character never reacts jealously to the witch doctor’s other erotic fixations. While these compulsions concentrate most intensely on “la bebota,” they also leave room for other erotic objects and include frankly homosexual advances, sometimes even directed at Portales.

In one of these sketches, for example (“El Manosanta 02”), the medicine man arrives on the scene telling Portales that he has just been playing tennis on Pluto. This gives occasion to a conversation employing a string of double-entendres which generally involve the *manosanta* purposely confusing Portales’ innocent statements about tennis with sexual references.[124] During this confab it surfaces that on Pluto the rules of tennis are different—for example, the rackets have much larger grips that must be wielded with

[124] E.g., when Portales asks him if he serves from above or below (“si la saca de arriba o de abajo”), the *manosanta,* conspicuously inspecting Portales’ chest and shirt collar, expresses mock disbelief that anyone would possess the physical dimensions necessary to carry out the former maneuver.

two hands at all times. This detail becomes especially important when we learn that another of the dwarf planet's dictums stipulates that the losers of matches must consent to being penetrated by the handles of their opponents' rackets.

When pressed by Portales, Olmedo's character admits that he has lost before, and in fact that in the last of such matches, his conqueror was a giant man with a correspondingly large implement. Lest we assume that such nominal *punishment* runs entirely counter to the sorcerer's sexual identity, a later moment in the same sketch finds him drawn as if by compulsion to begin tenderly stroking Portales' face. When the latter man inquires as to the motivation behind this action, the *manosanta* replies "porque tengo algo homose…eh, ¿cómo se llama?" then explaining, "todo ser humano tiene dentro de sí ambas, eh, materias."

The *manosanta's* omnisexuality makes clear, now televisual, reference to a facet of his autofiction that Olmedo had been developing for over a decade. During the repressive years prior to 1983, this virtual text situating the comedian at the center of a liberating, carnivalesque sexuality had been elaborated primarily through movies like *Los caballeros de la cama redonda* (1973), *Los hombres sólo piensan en eso* (1976), and *Fotógrafo de señoras* (1978), as well as through performance in *teatro de revista* and participation in well-publicized nightlife exploits. For audiences who grew up mainly aware of his puerile TV personality, "el Capitán Piluso," the blossoming forth of characters like the *manosanta* had the quality of a coming of age. But for adults who had also enjoyed watching Piluso because they could incorporate their perception of this program into their wider knowledge of Olmedo's more adult tomfoolery, the *manosanta*

sketches functioned not only as a lampooning of fraudulent *curanderos* who were capitalizing upon the identity crises of the 1980s, but as parody of Olmedo's own sex-infused tricksterism.

In comparison with other sketches, such as those of the office-place or the psychoanalyst, the *manosanta's* jokes and gags seem purposefully childish, as when Olmedo acts as if he were fishing with an invisible line and rod, calling out the number 18 each time he casts, provoking Portales to ask "¿Pican mucho?" to which he answers, "ahora, diecinueve." or when he twirls his finger in a spiral, pretending to unwind a long invisible string from his pocket, asking "¿Sabés qué es esto?" and when the answer is negative, spirals back towards his pocket, saying "Bueno, entonces lo guardo."

The joke behind these jokes is that despite his work's overall quality of mass-media breakthrough, in the particular much of Olmedo's magic consists of a series of cheap tricks that could have been learned from children and circus clowns. Further establishing the circus atmosphere, these sketches frequently feature the little person Óscar Carmelo Milazzo, upon whom the *manosanta* effects corny transformations, turning him for example into a rabbit—here Milazzo simply wears a pair of buck teeth and hops like a rabbit. Thus, while certainly treading new artistic frontiers, in part by bringing to the television a sexual liberation that should hardly be regarded as exclusively *machista,* Olmedo avoids the partial obviation of these advances that would have occurred had he taken himself too seriously.

MEDIATIC MALIGNANCY

Though the dictatorship's draconian *Ley de Radiodifusión* would not be replaced officially until 2009, in practice the return of democracy with the beginning of Raúl Alfonsín's presidency in 1983 dramatically reduced the extent to which televisual and other works were subject to censorship. David Rock's description of cultural production's general response to this liberalization seems also to describe comedy's more specific blossoming in the 1980s: "Casting aside the shackles of censorship and repression, dramatists, filmmakers, poets, and artists joined together in an outburst of creative energy and cultural vitality" (Rock 390).

As we have seen, Alberto Olmedo, as the country's leading *capocómico* during the remainder of the 1980s, in many ways acted out the sense of liberation and celebration communicated by Rock's description, taking sexual humor to a new level on Argentina's small screen, and using this bodily openness as a platform upon which to build a critique of *habitus* that even turned reflexively back upon its creator, incorporating the comedic profession itself into its satirical scope. Inherent to this incarnation of televised humor was an identification with the lower reaches of the body (politic), and an attendant spirit of carnival that emphasized class solidarity over high-level political involvement.

However, the *Proceso* had inflicted wounds far too deep to be immediately remedied by a liberalization of broadcasting regulation. Obviously, the human rights violations committed by the dictatorship will continue to affect the country, perhaps

throughout the twenty-first century. Less dramatic, but maybe in the end just as damaging, was the dismantlement of industry effected by the junta. As I have indicated, the media suffered as well from this act of sabotage. Nora Mazziotti (107), writing in 1996, said that Argentinian television at that time had by no means recovered from the debilitating years of the dictatorship.

For Mazziotti, who concerns herself primarily with the *telenovela,* the chief effect of media dismantlement was Argentina's inability to compete against Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela during the development of what she terms the "industrial" phase of this televisual format, when high-dollar productions were often successfully exported to other Latin American countries as well as Europe and Asia. However, perhaps even more telling is the fact that the televisual sketch renaissance of the 1980s spearheaded by Olmedo et al. would fail to dominate local ratings in the way that Pepe Biondi and his successors had done with their comparatively diluted content of the 1960s and 1970s.

Instead, for the first time in the 1980s top ratings began to be garnered by U.S. programming as well as local production, like the game show *Seis para triunfar,* that adopted foreign *envases* or formats. This anomaly not only speaks to audience preference for spectacle and special effect that could only be achieved with astronomical production budgets; it also demonstrates even more strikingly than the *telenovela* slump just to what extent the junta succeeded in their vendetta against local popular expression.

Thus, Ulanovsky's description of our comedian's popularity of the 1980s as "la fiebre Olmedo" may contain an eloquence even beyond what the prominent journalist and historian intended. Activating the term *fever's* medical associations, the *excitement* of this

comedian's audiences could be described as the perhaps unconscious reaction of a weakened body politic against the virulent infection of foreign cultural production.

CONCLUSIONS—SAN ALBERTO OLMEDO: *A VINDICATION*

In a 1992 article, Beatriz Sarlo rather snidely mentions Alberto Ure's (1992) description of Rosario's *capocómico* as "San Alberto Olmedo." Focused as Sarlo is upon rebuffing another critic's claims regarding the artistic nature of television, she gives Ure's description little serious consideration. However, precisely in light of his engagement with Argentina's socioeconomic situation of the 1980s, when the country was in desperate need of healing after the industrial and human-rights atrocities of the dictatorship, perhaps a real case may actually be made for "el Negro's" unofficial beatification.

Saints, of course, often are associated with *healing*, and as the etymology of this word indicates, healing connotes restoration of wholeness or unity. As I have argued, since the beginning of his career in the claque, Olmedo, whose surname fortuitously begins and ends with unity symbols, focused his efforts in this direction. Later, as an actor, Olmedo initiated a movement toward the unification of elements of popular comedy that had become dispersed with the advent of heavily monitored electronic media.

First, with his early "Profesor de locutores" and "Rucucu" sketches, he brought to television *teatro de revista's* preference for oral over written expression, as well as its

auto-critical and metatextual spirit. Far from representing an elitist vanguardism, these two latter procedures enhanced audiences' televisual competency, drawing them inward toward the center of artistic production.

Second, and perhaps most fundamentally, Olmedo re-established the long-lost or at least greatly weakened connection between comedy and the body. While generally avoiding direct political reference, perhaps due to recognition of the extent to which the "all-publicity-is-good-pubicity" phenomenon is exacerbated by modern mass media, Olmedo's exploration of sexuality—including themes such as homosexuality that were generally avoided even by *teatro de revista*—was in itself a political gesture. In addition to implicitly attacking the culture of repression instituted by various dictatorships, most notably the *Proceso,* Olmedo's sexually-charged sketches allowed for mordant portrayal of the country's woeful economic situation, and presented the adoption of a merry pansexuality as a possible remedy for social divisiveness.

Closely associated with Olmedo's focus on sexual function, we find a corresponding emphasis on the lower reaches of the body politic, which in the latter half of the 20th century gave birth to *Peronismo*, to date the country's most powerful and lasting expression of national unity. While Perón himself mainly extolled working-class laboriousness and practicality, Olmedo rounds out the picture, showing a proletariat that not only works hard, but also fornicates, parties, and speaks its own particular language.[125] Indeed, the sexual revolution he seems to advocate would be a natural

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[125] Jesús Martín-Barbero, writing just a year before the death of "el Negro" Olmedo (1987), might have been describing this comedian specifically when he wrote the following: "Es sólo en el espacio de la comicidad donde la televisión se atreve a *dejar ver* al pueblo, ese 'feo pueblo' que la burguesía racial

outgrowth, not of bourgeois iconoclasm, but of the popular sensibility he first encountered amidst the historic brothels of his native Pichincha neighborhood, in Rosario. It is through this sort of good-natured informality and trust in sociability of all sorts, he seems to suggest, that the country might come together to resist the forces of division.

As a final, subtly important component of his advocation of unity, Olmedo did not forget to include himself amongst the objects of his satire. As suggested by *Los fierecillos indomables*, *unimento*, like life itself perhaps, is much too important to talk 100% seriously about. Humorless approaches to unity, like that of official Peronism, or even worse, like the hypocritical nationalism of the most recent dictatorship, depend too much upon rigidly defined codes of behavior. Such codes restrain social elaboration to a stodgy, robotic dialectics or a zombified monologue. Humor, on the other hand, creates the veiny spaces through which dialogistic *unimento* may flow, bringing the social organism to life. Especially at the height of his career, when he might have felt a temptation to abuse the bully pulpit, it was essential for Olmedo to stay true to his comic calling, using jocular self-abuse to avoid sententious moralizing.

The healing unity advocated by Olmedo's artistic expression extended also into his effect on the television industry. In a time when local industry found itself increasingly dependent upon foreign *enlatados* and formats that were not organic outgrowths of local culture and history, Olmedo's sketches breathed new, now televisual,

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quisiera a todo trance ocultar. Una vez mas el realismo grotesco de lo cómico se hace espacio de expresión de los de abajo, que ahí se dan un rostro y despliegan sus armas, su capacidad de parodia y de caricatura" (256).

life into an essentially Argentinian form of cultural production that had to great extent lain dormant during electronic media's first half-century. The fact that this sketch renaissance was nevertheless not sufficient to win the ratings battle against foreign programming reveals the depth of the crisis in which local media found itself, and lends an air of martyrdom to the final years of Olmedo's career.

Of course, despite the feeling of healing unity that Olmedo brought to local media production at such a crucial time in his country's history, and despite, even, the presence of an Argentinian with marked Peronist leanings in the Vatican's highest office, it is unlikely that the comedian will ever enter the hallowed category of *official* sanctity. This is probably for the best, as it would contradict *el Negro's* own very informal spirituality and his anti-scriptural body politics. Besides, Argentina has a strong tradition of popular, unofficial saints, in whose company Olmedo would likely feel more comfortable. Like the Gauchito Gil, for example, Olmedo is solidly Argentinian,[126] of provincial origin, possesses a largely oral tradition of veneration, and never shunned sexuality (Funes).[127]

Consideration of Olmedo in this company also brings to mind Deolinda Correa, known as *La Difunta Correa,* who has her sanctuary in Vallecito, San Juan. During the civil wars of the first half of the 19th century Correa's husband was conscripted into the federal army and, with a baby son in her arms, she attempted to follow him across the desert to their destination in La Rioja. The heat and dehydration took its toll and she succumbed, but when some mule drivers found her the next day, her son was still alive,

[126] The small list of official South American saints includes only one Argentinian, Héctor Valdivielso Sáez, who only spent the first four years of his life in this country.
[127] The Gauchito originally fled his place of origin due to disagreements arising over his courting of a local widow.

suckling from her breast. According to legend, the man who built the first sanctuary in her honor was a mule driver who, after invoking La Difunta Correa, succeeded in reassembling a herd of animals that had escaped from him (Gentile 2)—perfectly illustrating the unifying function of sanctity.

Mother's milk must surely be one of the many ingredients of the *unimento* that Olmedo strove to transfuse into screenic cultural production, parched as it was after the long drought that the *Proceso* exacerbated almost to the point of no return. Despite the demise of sketch comedy as grande dame of television ratings, thanks in large part to Alberto Olmedo she would be survived by not just one, but many children who would undertake the strange task of "playing away games," as Ricardo Darín describes it, on their desertified home field.

Luckily these enfants terribles would often resemble their theatrical grandparents more than their perhaps overly decorous mother. Their combination of a boisterous physicality worthy of Olmedo with historical commentary would allow them to sidestep the traps of direct reference to contemporaneous public figures, at the same time striking at the roots of Argentinian political and economic power. Meanwhile, their (ever more precarious) existence would bear witness to the continuation of what Martín Barbero (257) calls "la presencia de lo popular en lo masivo"—i.e., the maintenance of locally specific traditions in cultural production even within an increasingly homogenized and internationally-controlled medium such as television.

Chapter 4—"Dancing en el Titanic": The Survival of a Critical Comicality in the Savagely Capitalist 1990s

The opening medium shot imparts a feeling of middle-class stability and respectability. To the left, in front of a bookcase, stands a scholarly-looking man with glasses, mustache and diminutive goatee. To the right, he is counterbalanced by a woman in a fuchsia sweater with a large leather purse, and between them on the wall hangs a brightly-colored expressionist painting. But their ensuing conversation indicates something is amiss. She tells him she's going out "con las chicas," and his strained-sounding "ajá" is followed by the first interjection of the laugh track that alerts us to the idea that we are supposed to be watching a sitcom. From this point onward, his grunts of assent become increasingly high-pitched and strangled as she informs him that she and her friends are meeting at a bar and that he shouldn't wait up for her, as she has no idea at what time she will be returning home.

"¿Te molesta?" she finally asks, perhaps sensing his discomfort, and he responds tamely, "No, mi amor. Somos una pareja, y cada uno tiene que mantener su individualidad." But then returning to the strangled tone he adds, "Andá no más," meanwhile disappearing into his adjoining study as if pushed by an invisible force. Only here, alone, with more books, musical instruments, and a picture of Freud as his backdrops, is he able to unleash his frustrations. "¡Yegua prostituta!" he shrieks, proceeding to describe in vivid detail the night of extramarital adventures he imagines his wife is about to enjoy. Meanwhile, using various methods he physically enacts the

symbolic castration he has already inflicted upon himself, whacking his member with a rubber mallet, slamming it in a closet door, shooting it with a pistol,[128] stretching it up above his head and plunking out a bass line, etc.

After having vented in this manner, he returns to the living room, where he calmly re-emphasizes his support for his wife's night on the town. She responds with a chaste, pecking kiss. "Qué bueno que seas así," she says, and he replies, "y claro, porque soy…" neatly transitioning into the faux sitcom's theme song, eponymously titled "Padre progresista": "Intelectual, músico y escritor, / inteligente y de buen pensar. / Con su juicio moderado, / siempre apela a lo racional." This recurring sketch ("El padre progresista") from *Peter Capusotto y sus videos* (2006-) employs the same pattern over and over, with the father alternating scenes of solitary acting out with heroic shows of *tolerance* in front of his spouse as well as their daughter, who has inherited his wife's lasciviousness, and their son, an inveterate pot-smoker.

Sitcom, as its name indicates, is also comedy, and we may attribute to this format some of the same characteristics that I have so far identified as inherent to sketch—notably the comic practice, identified by Bergson, of lampooning mechanical repetitions of outmoded attitudes and behaviors. In some cases, this operation may serve to stimulate social evolution by encouraging audiences to move beyond lockstep conformity to established *habitus* and repertoire. However, I suggest that the effectiveness of a comic format in this regard depends upon certain structural qualities. Contrasting with sketch's more open-ended format, sitcom's nearly inevitable tendency to resolve interpersonal

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[128] Perhaps a nod to Olmedo, whose "Manosanta" character would also occasionally punish himself in this way.

conflicts (often closely related to current social issues) at the end of each program reveals a marked desire to lead the witness and a lack of faith in audiences' abilities to draw our own conclusions, treating us like children in need of moral education.[129]

Given such circumstances, one must wonder whether sitcom's ultimate end is really the loosening-up of automatized human behavior, or rather the substitution of one form of mechanization for another. The resolutions at the end of each episode take the bite out of the character flaws displayed, implying that with minimal acts of *tolerance* and *understanding,* requiring little personal transformation (characters generally remain the same from one chapter to the next), most conflicts can be resolved, if only temporarily. Additionally, the emphasis on individual voluntarism as the key to resolution tends to negate or minimize the importance of larger social issues. Thus, complacent audiences are lulled into believing that, aside from the occasional improvement in interpersonal relations to be made through acts of independent willpower, society is close to perfect already.[130]

Sitcom's long history of success in the US may be symptomatic of a country whose hegemonic status in world politics and economics during the latter half of the 20th century has allowed for the creation of a narcissistic atmosphere in which identity politics

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[129] In his recent (2009), revisionist work on sitcom, Brett Mills cites Mintz's statement: "The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored." Mills' main argument against this description is that it could also be applied to other types of programs as well, such as drama. He then admits that "this doesn't necessarily negate Mintz's argument that such elements are common within sitcom." Mills' subsequent mention of various sitcoms without this structural characteristic tend, by their exceptional nature, to prove the rule.

[130] The cloying voice-over that presents the "Padre progresista" sketches intimates as much: "Y sí, las cosas cambian, somos más libres, más modernos, y nuestras mentes están más abiertas. Y si no, preguntále a este esposo y jefe de familia."

presents itself as the sine qua non of social progress. Our problems, sitcom seems to imply, are superficial, only skin-deep, entirely domestic (thus within our control) and once we get past them we will realize that basically everything is okay. Such an attitude has not only been attendant upon, but probably to some extent necessary for, the continuation of a global hegemony[131] often achieved through means that the general public would just as soon ignore.[132]

In Argentina, on the other hand, though sitcom has formed part of national programming since television's inception, during the medium's first thirty years as a competitive industry (1960-1989) these formats rarely achieved top ratings. Overall, audiences preferred sketch shows over sitcom.[133] How can we explain this difference? To begin with, whereas sketch had organic connections to previous local comedic expression, as represented by *revista* and its offshoots in radio and cinema, sitcom arose as an imitation of foreign cultural practice; Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén (39) note the essential similarities—beyond the obvious parallels in their respective titles—between Argentina's first sitcom, *Cómo te quiero, Ana* (1953) and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). Also,

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[131] Like Capusotto, US sketch comedian Amy Schumer ("Inside Amy Schumer—Sitcom") has also recently made a satirical parody of sitcom. In this sketch, after a few minutes during which the characters sit around in a living room good-naturedly bandying about predictable, anodyne insults, the content is summed up with following text over an otherwise blank screen: "THIS MANDATORY MULTI-CAMERA ENJOYMENT PROGRAM HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO YOU FOR THE GLORY OF THE EMPIRE."

[132] For a gripping Latin-American perspective on this question, see Patrice McSherry's *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (2005). This work tells the chilling tale of Operation Condor, the secretive Panama-based U.S. program that provided training, funding, and international coordination and communication for right-wing dictatorships throughout South America in the 1970s and early 1980s,

[133] During ten of the 21 years for which Ulanovsky, Itkin and Sirvén have a history of the ratings between 1960-1989 (the government apparently outlawed ratings during most of the 1970s) sketch shows occupied the #1 spot, and the #2 spot for five years. During the same period, sitcom broke into the top three only twice, with *La familia Falcón* at #2 in 1964, and *Los Campanelli* with a rare #1 in 1970. Compare this situation to that of the US, where during the same time sitcom held the top spot for 15 years, and sketch for only two (*Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, during the notably countercultural period of 1968-1970).

perhaps it was harder for Argentinian audiences to swallow the happy consciousness often pushed by this format, as their nation's undeniable economic dependence forced recognition of the fact that a good many of life's conflicts and crises are either beyond the individual's control, or require more complicated and onerous methods of solution than what can be depicted during the last five minutes of a television program. Sketch, on the other hand, with its concise, insightful, open-ended depictions of difficult issues and their overdetermining factors, may have helped to foster audience reflexivity and to facilitate creative problem solving.

However, in Argentina the first half of the 1990s witnessed a reversal of audience preference in terms of comedy, with sketch struggling while sitcoms like *¡Grande, pa!* (1991-1994),[134] *Amigos son los amigos* (1990-1992),[135] and *Mi cuñado* (1993-1996)[136]—all aired by Canal 11, otherwise known as Telefe—now dominated the ratings. Later, as the decade progressed, sitcom would be just one of numerous formats pushing to the periphery what had once been an artistic practice at the center of national culture.

Meanwhile, sketch itself, all but exiled and now more than ever returning to its roots in *revue,* began to engage in a sort of comical guerrilla warfare by focusing its send-ups on other televisual formats. In so doing, sketch artists would build upon and move beyond Olmedo's pioneering meta-televisual awareness, creating fine-tuned criticism of

[134] According to Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén "el éxito más rotundo de toda la tevé argentina durante cuatro años seguidos" (512).
[135] In the ratings of 1993, this program came in third, bested only by *¡Grande, pa!* and a soccer match between Argentina and Colombia.
[136] This program does not figure in the spotty history of the rating (which shows only the top three programs, and only for some years) elaborated by Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén, but the authors note that throughout the early 1990s sitcoms in general "seguían muy firmes"; also, Telefe, which took the lead in overall viewership soon after its privatization, based its ascent on "telecomedias y novelas" (488).

the myriad ways in which the modern small screen was mirroring and reinforcing *habitus* and repertoire at a time when the country was in desperate need of revising its guiding mythos. In the vanguard of this new comical movement, we find the program *Cha cha cha* (1993-1997), where Capusotto himself would do his first television work. *Cha cha cha* not only creates space, as previous sketch shows had done, for improvisation around disciplining discourses; it also maps out the historical processes by which television itself has come to create and reproduce these discourses. To explain this new, eminently meta-televisual manifestation, we must describe in some detail the sociopolitical environment in which it arose.

"UN PAÍS (HÍPER)NORMAL"

Describing Argentina's political history, Luis Alberto Romero notes that, besides the brief period between 1973-1976, until 1983 Argentina had only limited experience with democracy. During the 20th century, free elections had only occurred during between 1916-1930 and 1946-1955, and despite the nominal democracy of these governments, even they nevertheless showed little respect for republican institutions, separation of powers, and civil rights (Romero 271). Thus, in many ways Raúl Alfonsín's presidency (1983-1989) set the stage for a new experiment in Argentinian history, and its beginning was attended by general optimism. Encouraged by the new president's dedication to revitalizing democratic institutions and his commitment to civil rights, symbolized by the bringing to justice of the perpetrators of the Dirty War, many social

actors enjoyed, at least for a time, what Novaro and Palermo (18) call a "confianza acorazada contra toda evidencia en la 'inevitabilidad del éxito.'"

Unfortunately, as much as politicians and citizens alike would have preferred to ignore it, in large part "la democracia que se empezaba a construir era la heredera del Proceso" (Romero 273). The trappings of this unenviable inheritance included "un estado desarticulado, en vías de licuación" (Romero 273) along with national industry in a similar state, a foreign debt that had multiplied nearly six-fold from its 1975 level, poverty seven times higher, and rocketing inflation.[137] Alfonsín, applying a mixture of approaches ranging from Keynesian redistribution to austerity plans, made some initial progress on the poverty front (Arakaki 50). However, 1989 saw the return of hyperinflation and amid the resulting food riots he left office in disgrace, almost half a year before his term was set to expire (Blustein 19).

The man chosen to replace him, Carlos Menem, took office amid promises to return Argentina to the status of "un país normal" (Russel 259). Other Argentinians, both pre- and post-Menem, have expressed this desire for a return to "normalcy." In general, such declarations make implicit and oxymoronic reference to the possibility for going back to the—actually *exceptional,* not *normal*—affluence of the first decades of the 20th century, when growth in the country's agricultural sector, fueled by foreign immigration and investment, made for a per capita income "greater than [those of] France, Germany, Spain, and Italy" (Blustein 444). While Menem's invocation of "normalcy" no doubt shares this sentiment, the particular importance of the term for his administration

[137] Miguel Mateos' 1983 song "Extra, extra" sums up the period's mix of newfound liberty and grinding poverty: "Seguridad para crear, / y no tengo dinero para un mísero café en La Popular."

deserves our attention, as it pertains to my discussion of images projected contemporaneously by the television.

Indeed, Menem's actions often seemed to ratify the feeling expressed by Canon's ad slogan, "image is everything," which debuted the same year he assumed office. Not surprisingly, the image he chose to project was in keeping with the *normal opulence* he promised to bring to Argentina. His long sideburns in the style of Juan Manuel de Rosas,[138] provincial accent, and frequent use of soccer metaphors served to portray him as a man of the people, just as the $10-million renovations to the presidential residence at the Casa de Olivos, the landing strip and mansion constructed in his home town of Anillaco, and his fast cars and faster lifestyle seemed to augur the country's imminent return to first-world status.

Also, as Adriana Schettini argues in her book about the television of the 1990s, *Ver para creer* (2000), Menem's spectacular ordinariness—"pizza con champán" (41)—was to an extent just a means of distracting public attention while other figures wielded power behind the scenes.

Certainly, events such as his driving to PInamar[139] in a Ferrari at 120 miles per hour or his frequent rendezvous with attractive single women in the Casa de Olivos after his separation from his first wife, Zulema Yoma, drew a share of media coverage disproportionate to their relative importance to the national state of affairs. However, as it turns out, even more apparently *serious* developments in economic policy also amounted

[138] Caudillo *par excellence* and governor of Buenos Aires Province (1829-1832, 1835-1852), Rosas, as a member of a patrician family who was nevertheless fond of dressing and speaking like a *gaucho,* served as the perfect model for Menem's image.
[139] A coastal town some 220 miles south of the capital city.

to a series of facades obscuring the truth that would not become entirely apparent until the economic and political crises of 1998-2002.

The illusion of economic progress inherent to Menem's presidency was far from being merely a domestic projection. As Paul Blustein lucidly details, the measures overseen by Economy Minister Domingo F. Cavallo responded principally to a largely experimental notion held among contemporary international neoliberal circles as to the proper comportment of emerging markets. So perfectly did Cavallo's decisions fit this mold, in fact, that Argentina effectively became the "poster child for the Washington Consensus" (Blustein 4). Thus, Menem under Cavallo's tutelage set loose a wave of privatization,[140] removal of trade barriers, austerity, and general economic aperture that corresponded perfectly to recommendations set forth by institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.

Another, and perhaps the most famous, of these economic measures seems fraught with the sort of symbolism that concerns us here: the so-called *convertibilidad,* which created a fixed one-to-one exchange rate between the dollar and the peso, further dictating that Argentina's Central Bank must hold in reserve enough dollars "to back the total amount of pesos that had been printed" (Blustein 20). *Convertibilidad* put a momentary hold on inflation, at the same time convincing the IMF that Argentina was serious about reversing its "terrible history of credit culture" (Bluestein 139), but it was no panacea, and its symbolic value eventually resulted in extension of its application far

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[140] In this sense Menem, nominally a Peronist, "accomplished more de-Peronization in two years than the military had in twenty years" (Brown 264).

longer than practicality would have dictated. Indeed, it typified the magical thinking[141] inherent to a political climate that longed to see Menem as the "Mesías" (Romero 274) who had finally come to effect the "gran transformación" (Novaro 213) back to *normality*—now associated with the United States and its currency—implicitly prophesied by the country's new experiments with democracy.

All together, Cavallo's plan created a financial bubble that during Menem's first term did provide the country with some temporary economic relief. In keeping with our focus on *image,* it is important to note that most of this windfall went to the more mediatically *visible* upper and middle classes, even though as Blustein (35) notes some of the wealth did trickle down to blue-collar sectors in the form of slightly higher wages. But as the second half of the decade commenced, the cheap imports and resulting capital flight took their toll on the already-beleaguered national industry, resulting in soaring unemployment and a return to pre-Menem poverty rates, and even the middle classes began to see dramatic setbacks. Meanwhile, the foreign debt kept growing and default loomed as the government, shackled to convertibility, was unable to stimulate growth by printing money.

Paul Blustein's book, *And the Money Kept Rolling In (and Out)* (2005) shows how the illusion created by Menem's administration and validated by the IMF caused the eventual crash to be much worse than it would have been had Argentina restructured its

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[141] For a televisual demonstration of this idea, see *Poliladrón* (1995), Adrián Suar's drama, to an extent an Argentinian translation of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks,* with leather-jacketed young adults discovering their community's dark underbelly. In one of the first chapter's final scenes, Laura Novoa's detective character sits at a bar table while the barman uses sleight of hand to transform, before her eyes, a one-peso bill into its one-dollar equivalent. After a moment's reflection, her initial, childish delight at this trick changes to jaded indifference, and she tosses the money to the floor like so much paper.

debt and let go of convertibility when the situation started to turn sour in the middle of the decade. He describes how already at mid-decade within the IMF significant doubt existed as to the wiseness of staying the course, but the institution was loath to publicize its misgivings because of Argentina's "poster child" status. Meanwhile, firms like J. P. Morgan & Co. that were bringing Argentinian bonds to market, in the process collecting nearly $1 billion in fees, continued producing glowing reports of the country's financial stability until just months before the crisis hit. Not to be outdone, and with Argentina already swinging into full-scale depression, the IMF and World bank invited Menem to speak at their annual meeting in 1998, presenting his country as a "beacon" of "fiscal discipline, structural change, and monetary policy rigorously maintained" (Bluestein 7).

Regardless of Argentina's shining image abroad, one would think that the growing poverty and unemployment at home would have been sufficient to make voters demand a change of course in the presidential election of 1995. However, Menem won this contest handily. Apparently, the *image* projected internationally held significant domestic sway as well, and this leads us to a consideration of television, at this point by far the country's most massive medium.

As detailed in Chapter 3, during her brief presidency (1974-1976) Estela Martínez de Perón effected a government takeover of what had been up to that time Argentina's principal private free-to-air television channels (9, 11, known as Telefe, and 13), which then fell under military control during the Proceso. In 1983, just prior to the return to democracy, Canal 9 had been returned to its previous owner, Alejandro Romay. Telefe and Canal 13, however, would remain state-run for the next six years, under ineffective

leadership, accruing large debts, and entirely dominated by Romay's channel in the battle for ratings.

It should not escape our attention that the wave of privatizations unleashed by Menem began with television (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 489). Not only did the selling of Telefe and Channel 13 set the tone for the great auctioning-off of public interests that would follow; it also portended the sort of deregulation that would accompany this privatization. Shortly before opening the request for bids on the two channels, Menem's Congress abolished article 45 of the *Ley de Radiodifusión,* which prohibited print media groups from acquiring audiovisual enterprises. Thus, decisive percentages of shares in the groups that acquired Telefe and Canal 13 were respectively owned by magazine giant and former explicit supporter of the last dictatorship, Editorial Atlántida, and by newspaper goliath Clarín. Furthermore, during the latter half of the decade long-standing legislation preventing the ownership of media by foreign interests would also fall by the wayside, with companies like Citicorp and Spain's Telefónica acquiring important televisual holdings.

To some extent, Menem's management of his media image involved direct interaction with and control over television. Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén (489) comment upon the new president's made-for-television flamboyance, which led him to engage in antics such as "jugar públicamente al fútbol y al básquet, manejar aviones y autos de competición, y cantar y bailar en los programas de tevé." This affinity might be best exemplified by his closing out his 1995 bid for reelection on Marcelo Tinelli's immensely popular talk / variety show, *Videomatch* (1989-1996), an appearance in which

he was accompanied by his own impersonator. Meanwhile, though falling far short of the bowdlerism of the dictatorship, Menem was not afraid to exert his influence over the medium, sometimes approaching censorship. Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén (516-517), for example, suggest that Menem may have agreed to silence certain critics of the Noble family (owners of Clarín) on state-run ATC (Canal 7), in return for the Nobles' toning down criticism of the government on their newly-acquired Canal 13.

However, Adriana Schettini argues that for the most part direct suppression of political information was not necessary. Instead, Menem's privatizations resulted in an atmosphere she describes as "teleliberalismo," in which the frivolity and banality of commercial competition supplanted "la lógica del servicio público" (80), leaving the public increasingly uninformed. Certainly, not all the blame for this situation should be placed upon Menem nor upon the media companies for whom he opened the door. Audiences also proved eager to buy into a mediatic form of "convertibility" which seemed to equate, implicitly at least, their country's own self-image with that of the United States. The latter nation, after all, produced most of the *enlatados* with which the impoverished national industry had long been accustomed to supplementing its own at times meagre production. One can only assume that this tidal wave of foreign programming had important effects on audiences' perceptions of *normality,* in terms of both social structure as well as televisual reflections / reinforcements of said structure.

Thus, after its privatization Atlántida's particularly capitalist-minded Telefe began to dominate the ratings, quickly subjugating Romay's Canal 9, and it did so with

what Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén (535) call "telecomedia"[142] at the forefront of its programming, during prime time. Upon examination of *¡Grande, pa!,* its most successful program of this genre, and the country's most-watched series for four years, one might conclude that it could just as easily have been called, like Capusotto's parody, *El padre liberal*.

As Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén (512) note in reference to *¡Grande, pa!*, "era una realidad idealizada, porque todo siempre terminaba bien y el papá era muy permisivo con las hijas" (512). Arturo Puig plays the upper-middle-class father of three girls whose mother has died. His executive job at a women's clothier company, where a good deal of his *work* seems to consist of evaluating new lingerie designs modeled by statuesque females, affords him the means to maintain his palatial abode and to hire a maid / nanny (María Leal) of provincial origin. His predictable marriage to this woman at the end of the series seems to ratify the supposed "trickle-down" effects of the economic bubble of the early 1990s. Meanwhile, surrounded by women, several of them headstrong adolescents, Puig's character is provided lots of room for characteristic acts of *tolerance* and *understanding,* as well as for apparently *progressive* violation of the codes of machismo. In the first episode, for example, he ends up benignly acquiescing to the decision of his daughters, who have hired María Leal's character without his permission, as well as participating in tender celebration of his middle child's first menstruation.

[142] While Magali Martínez (2) argues that *telecomedia* and sitcom are not exactly the same, the main difference she cites is that the former format follows a plot line that ties episodes together, whereas the latter presents each episode as a discrete entity. However, many modern US sitcoms have this characteristic which she assigns exclusively to *telecomedia* (see, for example, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), *Arrested Development* (2003-2006), *Party Down* (2009-2010). Furthermore, perhaps most importantly for my purposes, and as demonstrated by the above-cited sitcoms as well as *¡Grande, pa!* the overarching plot line does not preclude each episode's happy resolution of its particular conflict.

While massive audiences consumed this import-inspired purveyance of happy consciousness, more acerbic sketch humor found itself increasingly consigned to the same late-night, relatively low-viewership spaces it has historically inhabited in the US.

However, sitcom was only one of the formats that, inspired by the influx of foreign programming, would push native sketch to the periphery during the 1990s. Surpassed in popularity only by sitcom (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 520), the *telenovela* also attracted large audiences during the first half of the decade. Admittedly, researchers have attributed to *telenovela* the fulfillment of certain sociocultural needs. Notably, its "dramas de reconocimiento" (Martín-Barbero 244, Mazziotti 14) reflect a certain reality in the context of widespread feelings of displacement resulting from the twentieth century's massive rural-to-urban migration. However, it is also true that in many respects *telenovela* has seemed to fulfill critical theory's worst suspicions regarding the advent of mass media—namely, that the primary purpose of such media (with television often perceived as the worst offender) is to encourage consumerist escapism and to further promote capitalist expansion through audience homogenization.

Mazziotti's assessment of the *telenovelas* of the 1990s indicates that their more pernicious qualities were often exacerbated during this period. Mirroring the ownership situation of the channels themselves, in which "los propietarios se diluían en corporaciones sin caras," (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 576), many of these *telenovelas* were high-dollar coproductions with both Argentinian and European funding.[143] In large

[143] Mazziotti (128) notes that a good many of these coproductions were partially funded by "el empresario italiano y político neofascista Silvio Berlusconi." While this is not the place to engage in elaboration of

part due to their for-export status, and confirming suspicions regarding mass media and audience homogenization, these programs were marked by "la pérdida de elementos autóctonos" (Mazziotti 139) such as local dialect, sociopolitical and even geographical detail. Mazziotti (139) further notes that these melodramatic tales tended to deepen *telenovela's* already-present tendency to focus on the lifestyles of "the other half" (or the other 1%?), encouraging audience escapism and generally avoiding, like many sitcoms, the presentation of conflict arising from socioeconomic difference. Like Menem's own conspicuous consumerism, such developments in *telenovela* would seem to have encouraged audience fantasies during the early1990s regarding the *convertibility* of Argentinian society, which might one day soon approach the standards of *opulent normality* so often projected by the small screen.

Unfortunately, as Roberto Bouzas (156) notes, Menem's policies of "apertura financiera," to a large extent responsible for the early inflow of capital into television production as well as other industry, did not necessarily translate into "una orientación sostenible al exterior." To the contrary, the reliance on foreign capital made Argentina especially vulnerable to the effects of market swings abroad. The first indication of this reality came with the Mexican financial crisis of 1994. The resulting "fears that Argentina's currency might follow Mexico's" (Blustein 27) caused international investors to withdraw holdings en masse. This financial blow was felt throughout Argentinian industry, perhaps especially in television. Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén (567) describe the results of the so-called "tequilazo televisivo": unemployment, a drastic

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full-blown conspiracy theory, it is interesting to note the coincidence of Berlusconi's political leanings with those of the new owners of Telefe, the channel benefiting the most from the *telenovela* boom of the 1990s.

reduction in salaries, and a fundamental restructuring of programming to accommodate budget restrictions. The *telenovela,* now to a large extent deprived of the foreign funding that had allowed for its lavish sets, exterior scenes, and big-name stars, would have the most trouble adapting to the new circumstances.

Thus, the second half of the decade would see the decline of *telenovela* (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 590), which was replaced by a format that was more economical, but probably just as effective in terms of distracting public attention from the political and financial calamities looming on the horizon. The rise of the talk / variety show, epitomized by Marcelo Tinelli's *Videomatch* (1990-2004), corresponded, on the one hand, to a growing reluctance among free-to-air producers to putting all their eggs in any single generic basket. Especially given the rise of cable and the difficulty of competing with its plethora of specialized entertainment options, many producers opted instead to focus their efforts on shows like Tinelli's, which might include such diverse elements as homemade bloopers, celebrity interviews, musical acts, sports coverage, interaction with live audiences as well as with the "man on the street," as well as a "light" form of sketch that will warrant some discussion later in this chapter. In 1997 Alberto Ure gave insightful commentary as to the economic advantages of the talk show: "los canales se defienden gastando poco porque nadie puede hoy invertir en grandes producciones y en los *talk show* ni siquiera se le paga mal a un guionista, directamente no existe" (264).

Meanwhile, these programs' extremely rapid transitions in combination with loud noises and bright colors were designed to attract the attention of increasingly distractible

viewers, and this in combination with their hodgepodge of formats seemed to foster a kind of televisual attention deficit disorder precluding thought-out analysis of sociopolitical reality. Also, as Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén (591) argue, the talk show succeeded in satisfying, at much lower cost than *telenovela,* audience tastes for maudlin and scandalous content: "El talk show ofrece 'clips' tremendos extraídos de la vida real y les da tratamiento de telenovela: los testimonios son 'actuados' con llantos, peleas y énfasis muy convincentes. Y a los actores no les queda nada." The group of new "stars" included individuals such as Samantha Farjat, who in 1996 admitted she had aided the police in framing Diego Maradona's manager Guillermo Coppola for drug trafficking, and federal judge Norberto Oyarbide, caught on video camera *in flagrante delicto* in 1998 at a gay bordello.

Finally, and in apparent consonance with advocates of the idea that "the medium is the message," the heterogeneous and fast-moving content of talk / variety show mirrored the general state of screenic media in the 1990s, as audiovisual expression expanded at a dizzying rate. By the end of the decade, in addition to the old free-to-air channels, Argentina would have access to 125 cable signals. Besides cable's technical *availability,* it was also in relatively widespread *use*, as 52% of households were paying for cable services in 1999, ranking Argentina fourth in the world behind only Canada (72%), Germany (70%), and the United States (61%) (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 505).

Some critical theorists (e.g., Michael Sipiora 181) argue that mass media, and the TV particularly, function as an instrument of Marcusian alienation, producing a "constellation of conditioned imagination and consumption-oriented lifestyles in which

the self is disfigured and its transcendent possibilities are repressed." While my own perspective is not so overwhelmingly condemnatory, I suggest that any argument regarding television's *alienating* properties might hold water especially well in a place like Argentina where, in 1999 (and in addition to the foreign *enlatados* which had always been shown on free-to-air television), the majority (63%) of cable programming was foreign-produced (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 507).

Sketch humor, a native cultural practice firmly rooted in national cultural history, had to compete not only against foreign-inspired local formats appealing to fantasies about *convertibility* to states of *normal opulence* (sitcom and *telenovela*), as well as against bargain-basement expressions of sensationalism and televisual attention deficit disorder (talk / variety shows), but also against the superabundance of specialized, often nonnative cable programming: Hollywood movies, music television, sports, cartoons, documentaries, porn, children's shows, etc. If, as Sipiora argues, televisually-generated alienation had by the end of the century become the norm even in the centers of global capitalism, the doubly-alienated Argentina had, at least in this limited sense, become *hypernormal*.

"UN PROGRAMA CÓMICO"

All the same, we should be careful not to take statements like "the medium is the message" entirely seriously, as this can lead too quickly to assumptions that content doesn't matter, that "all television is basically the same," and so on. Such attitudes may

have applied especially to sketch, along with other comic forms which as Mills says of sitcom, suffer from a “lack of pomposity” and “give the *appearance* of simplicity when they are actually highly complex” (4-5, italics his). During the medium’s first decades, such assumptions led many intellectuals to dismiss the small screen as unworthy of their consideration, or as deserving of only perfunctory attention. To an extent, this attitude may have constituted a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the lack of critical engagement left development of the medium mainly to those concerned with amplifying its commercial viability, with little attention being given to aesthetic value or creative engagement with sociopolitical contexts. Thus, just as general audiences could not be exempted from a certain responsibility for the televisual *hypernormality* of the 1990s, certain members of the intellectual establishment also contributed to this tendency because of their unwillingness to give the small screen the same consideration they would accord to any other cultural production industry (e.g., cinema, theater, the press, music). While in the lettered imagination these other media could exist as diverse entities responding to a great variety of cultural, artistic, industrial, and political factors, television remained a nearly exclusively monolithic expression of capitalist will-to-power.[144]

We can see this intellectual overlooking of televisual heterogeneity at work in the second chapter of Beatriz Sarlo’s *Escenas de la vida posmoderna: intelectuales, arte, y videocultura en la Argentina,* a work that concerns us particularly here because of its date of publication (1994) and because it refers to contemporaneous sketch comedy. The title of this chapter’s first section, “Z*apping,”* is particularly telling. Not unjustifiably, the late

[144] For a vivid demonstration of this discrepancy, note the difference between Pierre Bourdieu’s two works *Les regles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (1992) and *Sur la télévision* (1996).

twentieth-century habit of zapping, or channel surfing, seemed to many inheritors of the Frankfurt school to realize the worst nightmares of critical theory regarding the reduction of artistic expression to a near-infinite succession of soulless, mechanically-reproduced images. The first lines of Sarlo's chapter, "El sueño insomne," reproduce this perception, indeed suggesting that the critic herself, whether intentionally or otherwise, has become entangled in her own frightening self-fulfilling prophecy:

> La imagen ha perdido toda intensidad. No produce asombro ni intriga; no resulta especialmente misteriosa ni especialmente transparente. Está allí sólo un momento, ocupando su tiempo a la espera de que otra imagen la suceda. La segunda imagen tampoco asombra ni intriga, ni resulta misteriosa ni demasiado transparente. Está allí sólo una fracción de segundo, antes de ser reemplazada por la tercera imagen… (57)

These initial lines set the tone for Sarlo's analyses of several televisual formats, which include *telenovela* and sketch comedy. Predictably, this discussion emphasizes television's capacity for assimilating diverse formats and turning them all into the same succession of monotonous images. Apparently having found the answer before beginning her investigation, she matches her methods and content to the message she seeks to deliver. Thus, she describes "la televisión" as a monolithic entity, never deigning to mention even the title of an individual program, much less the details of its production nor any indication that the medium has ever existed within any sociopolitical context other than that of the great shopping center of postmodernity, where "el tiempo no pasa"

(17). In her own way, then, Sarlo also projects an image of Argentina as "un país normal," part of the global dystopia, with nothing in particular to analyze.

Nevertheless, perhaps inadvertently, she lets slip through the cracks enough detail regarding the comedy shows she describes, that one may reasonably guess at their titles. The first, which she cryptically calls "un programa cómico," is almost certainly *¡No toca botón!* Her descriptions of "el actor principal, rápido, astuto, fanfarrón y, al mismo tiempo, discreto," and of "el otro, quien lo acompaña, y le da el pie para las réplicas ingeniosas," must correspond respectively to Alberto Olmedo and Javier Portales. Though she recognizes the ability of the mysterious "actor principal" to use improvisation and "metaficcionalidad" to draw the audience into a "juego de complicidades" (94), these developments in the end only serve "la dinámica capitalista del medio que pasa por alto todo lo que pueda diferenciar a la televisión del público" (98). Apparently, according to Sarlo, these qualities of Olmedo's program had nothing to do with the historical period in which they evolved, during which a public recently besieged by repressive, elitist dictatorship was in desperate need of expressions of popular unity of the sort that Olmedo dedicated himself to producing. Nor does Sarlo draw any connections with the state of the industry at the time, when Olmedo's relatively low-priced "juegos de complicidad" were among the few cards the largely dismantled national television had to play against alien and alienating multimillion-dollar foreign productions like *The A-Team* and *V*.

Later in the chapter, she mentions more recent (early 1990s) developments in sketch comedy, again without naming specific programs, actors, producers, channels,

etc., as this would presumably destroy the aura-less *postmodern* tone she hopes to reflect. Again, however, the details betray her, this time when she describes "un sistema de préstamos por el cual la televisión alimenta el underground teatral y éste logra, más tarde, una forma de reconocimiento en la televisión" (104). This time her cagey reference unmistakably identifies the scene that evolved in and around the Centro Parakultural, a Buenos Aires venue for alternative, or *underground,* music and theatre founded in 1986. Here, many brilliant young comedians, among them Alfredo Casero, Diego Capusotto, Verónica Llinás, Alejandra Fletchner, Mex Urtizberea, and Mariana Briski, would develop their iconoclastic styles in an atmosphere of near-anarchy that is vividly described by María José Gabin in her memoir, *Las indepilables del Parakultural: biografía no autorizada de Gambas al Ajillo* (2001).

In the 1990s, the city of La Plata's struggling, low-budget, free-to-air channel América TV would provide these artists with their first televisual platform, airing *Cha cha cha* (1994-1997). Predictably, this program's often viciously satirical parodies of televisual genre are for Sarlo little more than an extension of the lazy, narcissistic auto-referentiality already developed by the unnamed "actor principal" of the 1980s who must almost certainly be Alberto Olmedo. Certainly, such an interpretation supports her across-the-board analysis of *la televisión* as a medium whose only objective is the accumulation of capital and whose adoption of "la parodia que le trae el underground" only serves to further a televisual manifest destiny which at the end of the chapter she compares with that of "el imperialismo blanco en el siglo pasado" (105).

What's really unfortunate about Sarlo's chapter on television is not that she's entirely wrong. To the contrary, as I have argued in both this chapter and the previous one, in many ways a good deal of television seems to reinforce unthinking acceptance of *habitus* and repertoire in line with dominant discourses, with capitalism as one of the primary hegemonic forces. In fact, on one hand Sarlo may understate her case by circumscribing imperialism to "el siglo pasado." As we have seen, the history of Argentinian television bears witness to a striking encroachment of cultural imperialism, to large extent made possible by a weakening of the local culture industry resulting from global economic imbalances. However, it's a shame that she takes her criticism so far as to fail to recognize the virtues of local comedy, instead lumping it together with everything else as representative of a homogeneous and homogenizing entity, *la televisión*. Despite the apparently *postmodern* style of her treatise, its dismissive take on local popular performance is part of an old, if not venerable, lettered tradition. Indeed, one notes an uncanny similarity between Sarlo's description of television and González' (7) identification of the most common intellectual perception of *género chico,* television's popular theatrical forebear from the beginning of the 20th century: "un prejuicio de que en este corpus 'todas las obras son iguales', o que estas piezas 'no ofrecen nada particular para analizar.'"[145]

As we have seen in the cases of Pepe Biondi, Alberto Olmedo, and many others, and as I intend to argue in the case of *Cha cha cha,* televised sketch comedy in Argentina

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[145] Nor is Sarlo alone in her transference of this attitude to her consideration of our own time's most popular medium. As television scholar Jeremy Butler notes regarding the small screen, "critics often presume that it speaks with a single voice" (7).

has its roots in a popular theatrical practice based upon the questioning of disciplining discourse, often emphasizing a return to the body as an organism in flux, fundamentally resistant to reification. But discourses change, as do their methods of delivery, and to show how sketch has succeeded to one extent or another in staying true to its origins, we must combine close, *particular* textual analysis with an explanation of the ways in which sketch has adapted to these changes. Therefore, for example, we must take into account the transformation of sociopolitical circumstances as well as concomitant metamorphoses in industries of cultural production. Only by examining these specificities can we hope to get a sense of the living, breathing reality behind "un programa cómico."

When the Going Gets Weird, the Weird Make Television: Industrial Specifics

Sarlo's summary dismissal of *Cha cha cha* is strange on more than one count. Not only does this program represent a rare, local resistance to the proliferation of alienating, foreign-inspired format; it also resembles, in more than one way, the literary vanguards that Sarlo often vaunts as the highest expression of cultural production. Likely the presence of certain qualities she admired in a medium she despised proved particularly irksome.

As it turns out, even the industrial circumstances surrounding the televisual space accorded to certain actors from the Parakultural support the idea of *Cha cha cha* as a kind of televisual vanguard. Like the "small publishing houses, more qualified to play the role of 'discoverer' which is necessary to innovate in the domain of books of quality" (Hilgers

and Mangez 154), in the early 1990s América 2 had little to lose. While more established local channels such as Canal 9, Canal 13 and Telefe, confronted with doing battle against cable and its associated international conglomerates, had to stick, like larger publishers, to "asset management at the expense of innovation" (Hilgers and Mangez 154), América 2 could afford to experiment.

Indeed, even the geographical specifics of this channel place it in the category of "outsider." The only one of Buenos Aires' free-to-air channels with its headquarters in another city, Canal 2 was founded in La Plata in 1966. Because its transmitter was located in Florencia Varela, in the south of the Greater Buenos Aires urban area, its signal could be picked up in some parts of Buenos Aires proper, but only spottily, and residents in the northern part of the city had no access to it. In large part because of these technical difficulties, the channel had perennial struggles with rent and ratings, which were still unresolved when it was bought by textile magnate Eduardo Eurnekian in 1990 (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 502).

Nor would the change of leadership immediately settle its economic or audience issues, though it would result in marked technical improvements. In 1994 Canal 2 acquired studios and a new transmitter in Palermo (in the northern part of Buenos Aires proper), effectively resolving its transmission problem, and also becoming the first major Argentinian channel with digital technology. However, its budget remained "exiguo" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 39). Eurnekian, though, seems to have had an eye for cultural capital, in the televisual sense, and was willing to take risks on unusual formats as well as to give innovators space for development. Roberto Cenderelli, the channel's first artistic

director in 1992, says of Eurnekian "Es un genio total. Un tipo que te da todo el espacio, pero que te lo saca si no sos capaz" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 539).

Eurnekian's daring served him well, as several of the unconventional new programs and personalities he introduced would go on to become very successful and / or to have considerable influence on subsequent developments in televisual genre. It is interesting to note that some of América 2's most notable innovations were achieved in a format with special sociopolitical relevance, the news show. As might be expected during a time when television seemed primarily focused upon tales of middle- and upper-class commodity and flashy, fast-paced succession of images, the old-fashioned news show, with its staid *objectivity* and stable, eye-level camera shots, quickly fell out of favor. Eurnekian and his young, often relatively inexperienced crews, on the other hand, proved adept at maintaining audience interest in crucial events in the national sociopolitical scene.

Raspy-voiced Mario Pergolini's *Caiga quien caiga* (1995-2001), with its "frases cortas, subtitulados risueños, cámaras bamboleantes, backstages varios y una onda entre fashion y burlona" (Ulanovsky, Itkin, y Sirvén 571), engaged rapt audiences with its acidic commentary on politics and associated porteño comportment.[146] Even more focused on politics and less on sociocultural details, the informal and iconoclastic Jorge Lanata also got his start on América 2, with his own program called *Día D* (1996-2003).

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[146] See, for example, the program's 1997 coverage of a rally for budding politician and eventual vice-president (2003-2007) Daniel Scioli, whom Pergolini et al. nickname "el motonauta peronista" (part of Menem's strategy was to surround himself with prominent media figures like Scioli, a world-champion powerboat racer, regardless of whether they had prior political experience or aptitude). At the rally, reporter Juan di Natali asks a series of attendees to describe Scioli's political agenda, and none of them can identify a single pertinent detail.

However, the stability of the political status quo of the 1990s despite the growing popularity of such shows may remind us of Olmedo's early experience with the relatively ineffectual "Yeneral González" sketches of the early 1970s. In his reflection on the death and funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, Régis Debray distinguishes between two semiological systems. The first, best communicated by the written word but also by "dispositifs de projection à distance (cinéma, théâtre), he calls "l'univers symbolique," associating it with the old nobility and their dependence upon separation and difference (from commoners). The second, "l'univers indiciaire," is essentially televisual (especially involving live television), and sets up an interactive model by which the new nobility, or *jet set,* as Debray calls it, attracts sympathy and support through frequent screenic visits to the family living room or dinner table, convincing audiences of the proximity between itself and *normal folks*. Thus, up to a certain breaking point, evidence of public figures' idiocies, indiscretions, and ineptitudes only serves to emphasize their *humanity* and to bolster their name recognition. Menem himself seems to prove the prevalence of this second model in 1990s Argentina, where despite many such incidences his support base did not crumble until the country was already in financial ruins.

Thus, though through their engagement with sociopolitical reality Canal 2's groundbreaking news programs seem to reflect somewhat that "lógica del servicio público" whose disappearance in 1990s television is lamented by Schettini, they also may respond partially to "asset management" on the part of a channel readying itself for breaking into the big-time ratings game. However, the same cannot be said for the televisual airing of the Parakultural comedians, which began before América 2's

technological advances, continuing until 1997, long after the financial inviability of such experimental comic programming had become evident.

Indeed, it is relative to the question of rating where Sarlo's attempt to associate *Cha cha cha* with a supposedly ubiquitous "dinámica capitalista" runs definitively aground. In a 1997 interview with *La Nación*, shortly after his program had been cancelled (precisely because the rating had finally gotten too low even for the indulgent Eurnekian) Alfredo Casero commented that in 1995 *Cha cha cha* had reached a *high* of "7 u 8 puntos."[147] Afterwards, in part because of a change of schedule that pitted the program against big soccer matches, this already modest number "bajó notablemente" (Bonacchi).

In short, though also a comedy show, *Cha cha cha* was no *¡Grande, pa!,* neither in terms of content nor in terms of audience, and its creation responded to something outside simple supply and manufactured demand. Casero describes Eurnekian (the Eurnekian of 1992-1997, at least)[148] as a "loco" who "puso un montón de guita" (Molero) to air a program that wasn't making him any money in return. Though also a businessman, there is something about Eurnekian that must remind us of characters like the Vicomte de Noailles, a patron of the arts who funded works like Salvador Dalí's and Luis Buñuel's film, *L'Âge d'Or* (1930).

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[147] Compare to the highest-rated sitcoms and telenovelas, which generally averaged between 40-50 points. Meanwhile, it was not uncommon for big soccer matches to be in the 70-80 point range.

[148] Casero intimated to *La Nación* that the cancellation of his program corresponded to the channel's adoption of a more business-oriented model. This seems substantiated by América 2's marked improvement in the ratings of this year, when it overtook Alejandro Romay's Canal 9.

As demonstrated by *L'Âge d'Or,* vanguardism and popularity are not always mutually exclusive. However, at least in televisually relative terms and for the moment, *Cha cha cha* would have to settle for a meagre audience. One might wonder how it had come to pass that a program that fundamentally revitalized a historically popular form of cultural production would have to limp along for four years on a shoestring budget provided by a Maecenas crazy enough to retain notions of public service during a period of savage capitalism. The answer, of course, lies in the weirdness of a national cultural industry dominated by alien and alienating interests.[149] As we shall see, though for the time being it condemned them to relative obscurity, this circumstance also provided the strange folk of the Parakultural with the material they needed to make their "non-televisual" (Molero) television show.

In the 1997 interview with *La Nación* (Molero), Casero said that *Cha cha cha* "no era televisivo," in fact citing this characteristic as the principal reason for the program's lack of commercial success. More than likely, as we will see, given time to fully consider the question, he would have said that it was *anti-televisivo*. At any rate, this latter quality no doubt had much to do with the fact that the actors themselves, at least at the beginning of their small-screen trajectory, *were* in fact non-televisual, as with a few minor exceptions their careers had so far developed in theater.

Gabin's book recounts the adventures of her small troupe of comedians, called Gambas al Ajillo, comprising herself along with Verónica Llinás, Alejandra Flechner, and Laura Markert, and their interactions with the other actors of the Parakultural. Telling

[149] As actor Ricardo Darín pithily puts it, here specifically referring to cinema, "El cine nacional juega de visitante en la Argentina" (Domínguez).

a tale of bohemian freedom and struggle, Gabin describes sketches with nuns getting naked, female folk dancers hanging rosettes[150] between their legs like testicles, uproarious send-ups of Domingo F. Sarmiento and other national heroes, but also nights when no audience arrived, dealings with shady and inept managers, and the ever-present shadow of economic hardship. Beneath all these unlikely circumstances, one can feel the throbbing motor driving it all forward: a revolutionary desire for change in a sociopolitical environment that, despite the transition to democracy, in the 1980s retained repressive qualities that were difficult to tolerate for the likes of Gabin and her colleagues. As she forthrightly puts it, "queríamos arrasar con todo: símbolos patrios, mitos, tabúes, hombres, mujeres y niños" (76).

As evidenced by the Gambas' sketches, at first the Parakultural comedians used a wide array of cultural phenomena as the objects of their satirical parodies, from church ritual to folk dances. But by the time they started working for Eurnekian, they seem to have focalized principally upon television and other screenic performance. This choice allowed for an essential revitalization of the tradition of *revista* in Argentinian sketch comedy. While early televised programs like *La revista de los viernes* (1959) had amounted to little more than live transmission of theatrical *revista* spectacles, *Cha cha cha* brought to television the critical *spirit* of early *revue*. Just as *La revue des théâtres* (1728) had encouraged audiences to consider the (unintended) laughable qualities of the year's theatrical production, *Cha cha cha* proposed that Argentinian viewers laugh at the ridiculousness of television itself.

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[150] One of the official Argentinian national symbols.

Certainly, early experiments like Olmedo's "Profesor de locutores" and "Rucucu" had shown that this sort of humor was possible, but during the medium's first decades the relatively low rate of small-screen literacy would not have permitted the development of a whole program based upon such meta-televisual antics. Meanwhile, sketch comedy stuck mainly to parodic and / or satirical portrayals of the *habitus* and repertoire of everyday life, with specific content reflecting issues and questions of special relevance to the varying sociopolitical climate of the times. Thus, for example, Pepe Biondi's work reflected and commented upon the 1960s' incipient tendencies towards violence and authoritarianism, and Olmedo expressed and encouraged the liberation of pent-up sexual energies and popular expression in the 1980s. But in the 1990s, as we have seen, the question of *image* itself, and of its (particularly televisual) production, had come to the forefront. Thus, the comedians of the Parakultural seem to have come to the realization that, if they were to live out their ambitions to "arrasar con todo," they would have to go after the television itself, that "extraño objeto" of the 1990s about which Adriana Schettini (11) would write, "si tiramos de un hilo, lo que viene es la sociedad toda."

Ringing Sitcom's Bell: **Los Campanelli *versus* "Los Cubrepileta"**

The title sequence for *Cha cha cha's*[151] first season, accompanied by Boris Vian's "Mozart avec nous," indicates the conscious, historically-informed nature of the

[151] All the clips of *Cha cha cha* mentioned in this chapter are posted on YouTube. Whole programs are cited by season and episode; thus, *Cha cha cha* 1:1 refers to *temporada* 1, *capítulo* 1, and so on. Other

program's televisual adaptation of *el espíritu revisteril*. While the language of Vian's song recalls *revista's* French origins, its content meditates fortuitously upon the nature of artistic recycling, specifically upon the re-use of 18th-century forms in the pop / massive art of the 20th century. Set to a poppy adaptation of Mozart's "Rondo Alla Turca," the lyrics develop a semi-jocular argument regarding the similarities between the minuet[152] and the cha-cha-chá, both dances based upon a three-step pattern. While "un gosse à perrouque blanche," (Mozart) had "fait danser tous ce gens-là" (people of the 18th century) with his imitation of a certain Turkish style, now the Turks themselves, along with the inhabitants of "Rio, Paris, New York, les Dardanelles," etc., dance the massively popular cha-cha-chá. This evolution, the song implies, has brought with it an increase in sensuality, as the "timide" and "fragile" minuet has been replaced by this "rythme tropical aux senteurs d'ambre et de cannelle." The use of Vian's tune thus implies an analogous relationship between theatrical revue and the television program *Cha cha cha*—a promise, as we will see, that does not go unfulfilled.

Meanwhile the actors perform on a theatre stage something resembling a low-budget mini-*revista*. Alfredo Casero, wearing a white wig à la Mozart, directs with a baton as the other members of the troupe dance clumsily across, some wearing only underwear, some in angel costumes, and some like Casero in 18th-century garb. These images are briefly interrupted by the program's logo, with a drawing of a woman in

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citations refer to fragments of episodes. In these cases, I have used the whole title under which the clip may be found on YouTube.

[152] "Alla Turca" itself is of course a march, not a minuet, though it is preceded by a minuet in Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11. This detail does not seem to concern Vian much, and such an error only adds to the song's irreverent appeal.

black-and-white art nouveau style, recalling the exact time period (late 19th century) of *revista's* first Argentinian manifestations. Likewise, Vian's cha-cha-chá references cannot fail to remind us of the mambo craze of the mid-20th century, in full swing when *revista* first hit the small screen in programs like *Tropicana Club* (1952).[153] All together, in addition to their suggestive temporal and format-related references, the opening sequence's visual elements share with Vian's song a merry slapdashery that brings to mind *revista's* self-effacing humor and embracing of amateurism—characteristics so archetypically depicted by *La rebista de 2 sentavos* (1933) as well as by the 1956 movie *Estrellas de Buenos Aires*.

This theatrical opening only sets the stage (or the set?), establishing conceptual connections with its pre-televisual predecessors. However, in keeping with the program's anti-televisual mission, with a few exceptions the rest of *Cha cha cha's* parodies are patently screenic, with special preference being given to the small screen. Nevertheless, as we will see, the title sequence's emphasis on historical reference would carry over to much of the program's content. As many of the references are televisual, this tendency reflects the Argentinian small screen's coming of age as a medium with historical self-consciousness. Thus, for example, one might search in vain for *Cha cha cha's* send-up of *¡Grande, pa!* or of any other amongst the swarm of similar sitcoms assailing the airwaves of the early 1990s. Sitcom, however, is present in the show's parodic repertoire; it's just that the citation refers to a decades-old artifact. The program's selection of *Los Campanelli* (1969-1974) as the parodic object of its "Los Cubrepileta" sketches permits

[153] Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén (36) describe this program's "clima de la boîte, del night club y del *teatro de revistas"* (italics mine).

us to identify some of the advantages of this tactic, as well as some of the difficulties it entails.

While referencing *¡Grande, pa!* et al. would have incurred the danger of simply increasing audience awareness of this already massively-watched programming, the "Los Cubrepileta" pieces attack the proverbial roots of this adventitious small-screen outgrowth. As noted above, with *Los Campanelli* sitcom made its first incursion into the top spot in the ratings. Produced during the so-called Revolución Argentina (1966-1973), a regime that was in many ways a test-run for the even more despotic Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976-1983), *Los Campanelli* worked on some levels as a vindication of authoritarianism in the sociopolitical microcosm of the family.

In her 2015 article, Elida Adduci Spina divulges the sneaky discursive manipulation behind *Los Campanelli's* "aggiornamento" of sitcom's historical tendency to reinforce "la conservación de la estructura familiar burguesa, el respeto por las normas morales y la autoridad de las instituciones estatales, religiosas y militares" (3). Until the 1970s, Argentinian sitcom as typified by *La familia Falcón* had focused on long-established middle-class families. Given their tendencies toward politeness and general good behavior, *los Falcón* and similar characters easily resolved the minor conflicts they faced and their depiction responded transparently to "los deseos de cierto sector conservador de la sociedad que pretendía salvaguardar los valores de la moralidad burguesa en un momento de efervescencia socio-cultural y crisis de la institución familiar" (Adduci 6). However, as we have seen, such shows almost by definition failed to attract large popular audiences.

As elucidated by Adduci, *Los Campanelli's* rise to success was made possible by its groundbreaking inclusion within the sitcom model of a wide range of social strata. Though the family head, don Carmelo, is of working-class origin, his children run the socioeconomic gamut, from the business executive played by Claudio García Satur, to Santiago Bal's unemployed moocher (Adduci 9). The mix of classes required a corresponding broadening of dialectical, gestural, and behavioral traits, with special emphasis on those of Italian origin, including a stereotypical, strident irascibility which contrasted significantly with the formal politesse of previous family comedies. On one hand such inclusion, however clichéd, could not help but increase the program's cultural representativeness, at the same time alluding to "la puesta en crisis y la desintegración de la institución familiar propia de la época" (Adduci 12). However, far from actually questioning the family structure, the Campanellis' loud arguments and shoving matches ended up only amounting to a "naturalización de los conflictos" (Adduci 2) as part of the supposedly normal, and essentially bourgeois, patriarchal kinship system.,

For example, despite the real tendency for women of working-class origin to hold jobs outside the household,[154] all of *Los Campanelli's* female characters "están destinadas a los trabajos domésticos" (Adduci 9). Also contradicting sketch's frequent assertion of the reality of extra-marital relations, in *Los Campanelli* "el vínculo conyugal funciona como la base de la familia" (Adduci 11). Thus, despite their frequent arguing, the family remains essentially "reticente a los conflictos políticos y a las transformaciones socio-

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[154] This tendency predated *Los Campanelli* by many decades, and my own work has examined representations of such, for example, as long ago as *Revista nacional* (1903), more recently in radio characters like Niní Marshall's Cándida, as well as in the *revista* movie *Estrellas de Buenos Aires* (1956).

culturales propias de la década de 1970" (Adduci 9). Finally, in typical sitcom fashion but now with a certain arbitrary violence that should not escape our attention given the sociopolitical context, this normative message is driven home at the end of each episode when the paterfamilias don Carmelo, seated at the head of the table during the traditional Sunday luncheon, silences his uproariously bickering family with an even louder holler: "¡Basta! ¡non quiero oire ni el volido de una mosca!" Then, once this autocratic pronouncement has been heeded, he can express in his dialectically marked tongue the same sentiment passed down in more *castizo* tones by his sitcom forebears (as well as by the supposedly modern, tolerant *telecomedias* of the 1990s): "¡No hay nada más lindo que la familia unita!" (*El veraneo de los Campanelli*).[155] The violence here is not only interpersonal, but discursive. Set up similarly to a traditional *grotesco criollo,* with the protagonist teetering on the border of a destruction of his own illusory self-image (that of contented bourgeois paterfamilias),[156] these programs amputate the final, disastrous self-awareness of the *grotesco criollo*, replacing it with an alienating happy consciousness that is just as arbitrary as the father's shutting-down of the family squabbles.

Certainly, it would seem to have been easier to parody a traditional, homogeneously middle-class sitcom like *Los Falcón,* or like its progeny of the 1990s, *¡Grande, pa!* et al., than *Los Campanelli,* which already included a significant degree of absurdity and overacting. On one hand, the "Cubrepileta" sketches make valiant content-related efforts toward pointing out the manipulative aspects of their parodic object. The

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[155] Due to the impossibility of acquiring video record of the televised version, Adduci's analysis as well as my own make inferences based upon two cinematic adaptations, *El veraneo de los Campanelli* (1971) and *El picnic de los Campanelli* (1972).
[156] For a good description of *grotesco criollo*, see Pelletieri's 1988 article (58) on Armando Discépolo.

name of the family, for example (literally, “swimming pool cover”) ingeniously spoofs the propagandistically quotidian quality of “Campanelli” (“doorbells”).[157] The the theme song—“Los Cubrepileta, los Cubrepileta / la familia que anda siempre en motoneta”—also condenses the stereotypical *Italianness* of *Los Campanelli* to an unmistakably caricatural level. In terms of behavior and speech the Parakultural actors’ strategy seems to have been a kind of *hyper*overacting, as in the dinner-table scenes, when the family exaggerates the grotesqueness of los Campanelli’s eating habits by shoving great wads of spaghetti into their mouths and leaving it hanging down and falling out while they yell at each other.

However, perhaps the most important parodic element of “Los Cubrepileta” is the focus on the master of the household, don Luciano. In part no doubt owing to sketch’s time constraints which allow little opportunity for narrative digression, the narrowed focus also allows these pieces to emphasize the patriarch’s authoritarianism and to show how it is based upon a willful ignorance regarding the reality that surrounds him. Amongst the many examples of this, the events surrounding the birth of Luciano’s son Angiulino (played by Jorge Takashima) and this child’s maturation (“El hijo japonés”) are particularly representative as their use of flashbacks shows how the father’s unwaveringly stubborn negation of reality eventually results in a negation of time itself.

This sketch begins in the patio of a *conventillo* in 1963 as Luciano awaits the birth of his child. Soon, the happy news arrives, as the midwife informs him in Cocoliche that

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[157] While the doorbell image is suggestive of the *opening* of sitcom’s portals to socioeconomic heterogeneity, the concept of the “cubrepileta,” an item generally *owned* only by those with the means to buy and maintain a pool, may allude to the usefulness to the bourgeois of a program wherein their own values are symbolically ratified amongst the popular classes.

"¡E un varoncítono!" However, complication soon arises, when after a vicious tugging match over the baby—actually a cheap plastic doll—his wife (Gisela Gaeta) must relinquish her control, and Luciano and two of his friends (Santiago Ríos and an unidentified actor) are able to see the child's face, which has stereotypically Japanese features. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Luciano continues insisting that his son is of "la más pura sangra italiana," and when his friends dare suggest that "questo nene e giapponese" his towering mix of chauvinistic and *machista* outrage leads him to draw a gun, fire it once and wave it around until everyone agrees the baby must be 100% Italian.

The next two scenes, one set in 1979 and another in the present (1995) show the passage of time has done nothing to soften Luciano's position regarding his son's paternity and racial heritage. In the first, an adolescent (Daniel Marín) is assassinated by Luciano's *mafiosos* (Santiago Ríos and the same unidentified actor from the first scene) for having casually referred to Angiulino as "el chino."[158] In the second, longer scene, Luciano's daughter (Vivian El Jaber) arrives late to the Sunday supper with her new boyfriend (Diego Capusotto) in tow. Looking for an excuse to cause trouble, the head of the family asks the boyfriend to consider a hypothetical scenario: If he happened to wind up alone for six months with the daughter, would he touch her *oquete*?[159]

When pressed, Capusotto's character, too honest for his own good, admits that at some point temptation might get the better of him. But Luciano's ensuing tantrum is nothing compared to the conniption unleashed when the boyfriend, trying to calm

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[158] Just before he is shot, Marín cries "¡Viva la Juventud Peronista!" Since the reason given for his execution is personal, not political, this slogan works as a temporal marker as well as a conceptual tie between Luciano's familial authoritarianism and the dictatorship.
[159] An "Italianate" version of *ojete,* or "ass(hole)."

Anguilino, who has become overexcited while breaking up the conflict, utters the fateful words, "no te alteres, *japonés*." This time the whole family erupts in a frenzy compounded by the boyfriend's attempted rectification—"bueno, coreano"—and Luciano, in a typical fit of overreaction, jumps out the window, which as it turns out is only on the ground floor. Still, the fall breaks his elbow and probably saves the boyfriend's life as the father, momentarily incapacitated for further destruction, must be driven to the emergency room. Adduci's analysis of *Los Cubrepileta* as reinforcer of normative values and naturalizer of conflict is thus prefigured in satiric fashion by Luciano, the ultra-conservative father figure who would sooner break than bend.

Thus, *Cha cha cha's* attack on the foundation of popular Argentinian sitcom emphasizes the genre's static conservatism. Indeed, as Manavella et al. (2012) argue, many members of the Cubrepileta family seem "estancados en el tiempo" (10). As demonstrated by the "hijo japonés" episode, to a large extent this inability to move forward is caused by the family's unthinking validation of the father's patriarchal authoritarianism. However, we should also examine the causal mechanism behind Luciano's own purblind machismo. As it turns out, *television itself,* specifically sitcom, reinforces particularly pernicious aspects of this character's behavior. This becomes clear in an episode ("Los Cubrepileta van al Tigre") that narrates a dream Luciano has when he falls asleep while watching cable television.

Though the episode makes no direct citation, the dream's events obviously mix Luciano's own personal preoccupations with the plots of the two cinematic adaptations of *Los Campanelli*. Like *El veraneo de los Campanelli* (1971), in Luciano's dream the

family goes on vacation in an attempt to calm the father's rattled nerves. But like *El picnic de los Campanelli* (1972), instead of going to the beach city, Mar del Plata, they head for the much closer tourist attractions in Tigre. Once the family has departed, the plot development begins to reflect Luciano's paranoiac idea that his daughter's boyfriend is a "degenerato" whose only objective is to "tocarle el oquete a la nena." Thus, en route to Tigre, Capusotto's character devises a nefarious scheme, convincing Luciano's grandchild (played by Casero's son, Nazareno) to apply an injection of tranquilizer to the unwitting patriarch's backside.

Then, when the boyfriend catches a big fish and presents it to his prospective father-in-law, the chemically pacified Luciano is so impressed that he announces Capusotto and "la nena" must get married immediately, right there in Tigre. Developing a common sitcom trope, the wedding preparations begin to unfold, but at the same time word gets out that Luciano has been drugged, and he arrives at the ceremony just in time to stop the union's official declaration. The sketch's ending returns us to reality, with Luciano still asleep in front of the TV. He is awakened by Capusotto's character, who has come to bring him a glass of wine. The patriarch accepts it, but then throws it in Capusotto's face. When asked why he has done this, he replies "por las dudas, porque, ¿sabés lo que sos vos? Una porquería." As in "El hijo japonés," the focus on Luciano allows for a caricatural condensation of what Adduci describes as the patriarchal elements of *Los Campanelli*. The father figure fetishizes his daughter's virginity to such an extent that he is unable to relinquish it even through the officially sanctioned ceremony for effecting the exchange of women.

Moreover, this sketch makes a clear connection between popular sitcom and retrograde behavior such as that demonstrated by Luciano. In effect, he has been drugged, but not by a "tranquilizante para tanos," as the oneiric Capusotto calls the injection applied by the grandchild, nor by the glass of wine offered him at the end. Rather, stereotypical attitudes seeping from the television into his subconscious, in combination with his own personal prejudices, make for a hallucinogenic effect so powerful that he acts on it in reality.

Finally, in Luciano's disruption of the wedding, we can find a metaphor for the sneakily propagandistic effects of *Los Campanelli*. Just as this sitcom sensation of the seventies apparently disrupted the traditional *telecomedia* by introducing ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity, the wedding—a sitcom standby, as we have seen—is interrupted by Luciano and his band of bellowing *tanos*. However, in neither case does the modification lead to liberation. While *Los Campanelli* merely extended to other social classes the same bourgeois family structure pushed by a long succession of authoritarian regimes, the Cubrepiletas' disrupted nuptials in the end only serve as further expression of Luciano's pathological need to control his daughter's sexuality.

"TEMBLOR DE BOMBACHAS" *VERSUS THE GREAT GREASY SPOON IN THE AIRWAVES*

Cha cha cha did not avoid all reference to contemporaneous programming. As we will see, it approached the *telenovela* by parodying long-standing elements as well as new developments in the genre. However, similarly to the sitcom sendup, this shotgun

strategy also allowed Casero's troupe to avoid specific citation (and involuntary promotion) of currently popular shows.

Certain of the *telenovela's* characteristics have tended to remain the same over time. Perhaps chiefly among these, one may identify its implicit validation of capitalism, achieved by portraying working-class characters' rise to fame and fortune as being an almost inevitable result of the combination of individual voluntarism and the numerous strokes of good luck offered by the sociopolitical environment. Additionally, this format tends to attract viewership with sensationalist appeals to maudlin sentimentality and soft-core sexuality, as well as with the oxymoronically predictable *surprise factor* associated with the above-mentioned "dramas de reconocimiento."

However, the 1990s saw new developments in the genre. As the decade began, the great influx of foreign capital associated with Menem's "apertura financiera" manifested itself through a wealth of lavish Argentinian / European coproductions (Mazziotti 125).[160] But the fancy sets, exterior shoots, and stellar casts often came at the price of a loss of local linguistic, sociopolitical, and geographic detail (Mazziotti 139), as high-dollar investors demanded a product that could be exported throughout Latin America and to other parts of the world as well. Finally, the Mexican economic crisis of 1994 would cause further transformations, as the *telenovela,* forced to trim its once opulent production values, searched for ways to regain its audience appeal. Part of this search included branching out into other genres such as comedy (Mazziotti 154, Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 550) and police drama (Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén 575). Also, echoing the

[160] As Mazziotti notes, by contrast the 1980s were characterized by pan-Latino coproductions and the general regional dominance of the Mexican, Venezuelan, and Brazilian industries.

illusory tone of Argentina's national and international political discourse, now more than ever the genre fostered fantastical, escapist visions of socioeconomic reality, engaging in what Mazziotti (145) describes as a virtual "anulación de contradicciones sociales como conflicto."

Cha cha cha made two telenovela spoofs, the shorter, experimental "Mundo de cotorras" (1996) and the more extensive "Temblor de bombacha" (1997). The latter's title, which might be translated as "Trembling Panties," indicates its farcical treatment of *telenovela's* often blatant, if soft-core, appeals to a stereotypically *feminine* sensuality. From its fuzzy, flowery, pastel-colored opening sequence, to the languid, indeed drunken-sounding speech of its characters, to the comically rapid swings from apparently smoldering physical attraction to flaming animosity, "Temblor de bombacha" describes a genre whose nearly exclusive focus on the passions leaves little room for anything else.

Cha cha cha utilizes female impersonation in other sketches, but the transvestism in "Bombacha" is especially effective in terms of conveying the absurdly clichéd female *habitus* often modeled by television, with *telenovela* no doubt one of the central offenders. Casero's portrayal of the ludicrously steamy protagonist certainly lives up to her suggestive name, "Conchola," as the comedian uses his physical presence, nearly as massive as that of his predecessor Jorge Porcel, but more dynamic, to ham up telenovela's overriding, hackneyed sensuality. Decades before OxfordDictionaries.com would add the term "duck face" to its list of modern lingo, Casero uses his pantomime[161]

[161] Enhancing the pout's mock eroticism, Conchola maintains the expression while downing her (presumably alcoholic) drink, causing the beverage to drip scandalously from her mouth and down upon her dress.

of this expression to signal Conchola's receptiveness to the advances of "Bombacha's" first *galán,* played by Fabio Alberti.

Meanwhile, *Cha cha cha* attacks *telenovela's* tendency to romanticize sexuality by instead emphasizing its animality, as in the initial encounter between Conchola and Alberti's "Ricardo," when shots showing the two ogling each other are interspersed with images of dogs and farm animals ("Temblor de bombacha 1"). Later, when Conchola is alone with her second suitor, "el Doctor Díaz Vélez" (Javier Iriarte), she shares her impression of him in an aside, at first saying in typically melodramatic, romantic terms, "La manera que me habla, me da un frío, me da un miedo…," but then specifying, "me da una cosa *acá*…siento *acá,"* while spreading her legs and emphatically gesturing toward her groin ("Temblor de bombacha 5").

Lest we confuse *telenovela's* accentuation of gynecological sexuality with liberation from *habitus* binding women to patriarchal social structures, *Cha cha cha* makes sure both of Conchola's primary suitors typify the sort of *galán* often presented by the genre as the be-all-end-all of feminine destiny. Ricardo and the Doctor both possess the marks of traditional economic and cultural distinction, employing a lexicon and syntax that the Royal Academy could not but approve, owning mansions, and drinking champagne. Especially in the case of Ricardo, the love interest who reappears throughout the mock series, the program pushes this image to burlesque dimensions, putting Alberti in a ill-fitting blond wig in imitation of a preppy 1980s hairstyle.

Ricardo and Conchola meet at the beginning of the series when he inadvertently kills her former suitor (Daniel Marín) with a stray tennis serve ("Temblor de bombacha

1”). His original appearance, rising up from behind the hedgerow, enveloped in an incandescent halo, can only be described as an apotheosis. Confirming this impression, his subsequent invitation to Conchola is phrased in the language of a soap-opera idol: “Me siento verdaderamente avergonzado, y quisiera redimirla. Le invito a cenar a mi mansión. Un lacayo pasará a buscarla exactamente a las ocho.” How many melodramatic heroines have found *redemption* in the arms of just such a gallant fellow, thereby giving testament to a civilization’s worship of lucre? And isn’t this just the sort of salvation Carlos Menem proposed to extend to his beleaguered country, down on her luck?

One cannot help but associate the ease with which Conchola attracts one well-heeled beau after the next with the apparently *easy money* flowing into the country during the first half of the 1990s. In fact, as we have seen, the *telenovela* boom of that period was made possible in large part by Menem’s “apertura financiera.” Just as the *image* Menem sold (of) Argentina during that period was too good to be true, Conchola’s luck is unwaveringly fantastical. So much is this the case that her only socioeconomic downturns occur as a result of personal choice, when—inevitably as a result of a lovers’ quarrel—she declares “me haré puta,” and trounces off for a sojourn in the streets.[162]

However, in typical *Cha cha cha* fashion, “Bombacha’s” parody has a wide scope that takes in not only contemporaneous programming, but the history of the genre as well. Thus, for example, the mock series’ second episode reveals that Ricardo’s mother is actually Italian-born actor and 1960s / 1970s *telenovela* star Rodolfo Ranni (played by Diego Capusotto, who actually bears little physical resemblance to Ranni). Rather than

[162] Apparently contradictorily, but actually true to the genre’s reproduction of the Madonna-whore complex, Conchola nevertheless declares in a late episode that she is still a virgin.

exposing the “true identity” of Ricardo’s mother, this absurd twist points toward the demagoguery inherent to *telenovela’s* touted “dramas de reconocimiento.” While some audience members may have gone so far to imagine such histrionic revelations as reenactments of their own family dramas brought about by the great rural-to-urban migrations of the 20th century, in reality of course they were only witnessing the melodramatic antics of some small-screen actors selling soap, or diapers, or shoes.

Meanwhile, other elements of “Bombacha” point toward the 1980s. *Telenovela’s* rampant big-money emphasis of the 1990s has its roots in what Nora Mazziotti calls the “etapa de industrialización” (34) of the 1970s and especially the 1980s. This period saw the emergence of the “big three” producers, Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil, who were able to consolidate *telenovela* production as a for-export industry, selling throughout Latin America, the United States and Europe, as well as parts of Asia and Africa. Accordingly, “Bombacha” combines references to all three countries. Conchola and Ricardo speak with a hammed-up Venezuelan accent, eating their esses with a voracity that can only be compared with their hunger for romance. *Cha cha cha* also insinuates that the series has been dubbed for export to Brazil, translating its commercial cuts—“Enseguida volvemos con *Temblor de bombacha*—into pidgin Portuguese: “A pronto avoltamos com *Tembleque de bombacheira*.” Additionally, its second episode, which includes tongue-in-cheek closing credits, attributes the copyright to “Telebisa,” in an obvious reference to the giant Mexican multimedia company.

Finally, “Bombacha” even includes references to telenovela’s contemporaneous genre-bending attempts at conserving audiences despite the drastic budget cuts of the

second half of the 1990s. *Cha cha cha's* portraiture of the same emphasizes its slipshod incongruity. In episode 6, for example, Conchola, having taken to the streets again,[163] gets into a rumble with a gang of thugs. She defeats them handily, crushing them with giant pieces of styrofoam painted to look like concrete. But then, as they are all lying about groaning, the atmosphere of action-adventure is interrupted by a cheesy disco song. The transition is so jarring that even the actors appear perplexed at first, but soon lighten up and begin gyrating to the beat. But the impromptu musical is made to include abrupt transformation even within itself, as Donald Clifton McCluskey, in the singer's only work on *Cha cha cha,* makes an unannounced appearance, the disco beat giving way temporarily to McCluskey's pop ballad.

Especially in its last episodes, "Bombacha" includes other generic intrusions as well. These include fantasy—Capusotto as Ricardo's mother / Rodolfo Ranni, descending from "the beyond" via a crude (and obvious) rope-and-pulley device that is always on the verge of causing real disaster, as in the third episode when it interferes with the wiring of the lights, causing sparks to fall down on Alberti[164]—and mixed Kung-fu / science fiction, as in the fourth episode, when Ricardo's dead mother returns as a "Ninja 500"[165] and does battle with the intrepid Conchola, who in a flash of light exchanges her nurse's uniform for a Jedi cloak.

[163] This time, emphasizing this recurring plot twist's rather desperate demagoguery, Conchola begins the episode by speaking directly to the audience, looking into the camera and dramatically declaiming "Mi vida está en la calle. Soy un ser *popular*."
[164] "Bombacha" later incorporates this extra-diagetic accident into the storyline, citing it as the cause of Ricardo's blindness.
[165] Actually a sort of motorcycle made by Kawasaki.

If there is a way to sum up "Bombacha's" panoramic parody, it must make reference once again to the closing credits of the second episode. This sequence begins sillily, attributing credits to obviously made-up personages such as Carlos Garompetta[166] (producción), Tito Colatromba[167] (bailarín), and Caco Patane (microfonista) as well as historical figures such as J. C. Onganía[168] (also a "producer") and Alejandro Romay.[169] However, though just as absurd at first glance, the second part of these credits may in fact contain a fairly pointed *summing up* of telenovela's primary function over the years, and perhaps now more than ever in the 1990s. Here, dropping all pretense of closing credits, the end of the sequence consists simply of a typical greasy-spoon menu: "Café solo: $1.00; Café c/leche: $1.50; Super Pancho: $1:00; Hamburguesa: $1.50," etc. Do the genre's great *dramas de reconocimiento,* rags-to-riches tales, and emotional turmoil all in fact boil down to this: so many empty calories, served up hot at bargain-basement price to a clientele who can't afford anything else, with only a stray *pancho* or *pebete* to remind them what country they're in? While such an estimation must surely fall on the pessimistic side, it may perhaps be excused, if not validated, by the sad state of the genre and its associated sociopolitical climate in the 1990s.

Fucking Around With the Talk Show: **"Mañanas al pedo"**

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[166] *Garompa* is *vesre* for *poronga*, or "schlong."
[167] This fictional last name could be translated loosely as "Buttstorm."
[168] Juan Carlos Onganía was de facto president during the first four years (1966-1970) of the so-called *Revolución Argentina*.
[169] Nicknamed "el zar de la televisión," Romay was the long-time owner of Canal 9, undisputed leader of the ratings during most of the 1980s, and his son, Omar, did in fact produce many *telenovelas,* amongst them the 1989 sensation, *La extraña dama*.

However, as the 1990s progressed, the telenovela, beleaguered by budget cuts, began to fall into the category of dead horse no longer worth beating nor lambasting. As Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirvén have indicated (591), its place was quickly taken by a genre capable of generating the same mix of demagoguery, sentimentalism, and soft-core eros, all at just a fraction of the cost. The *talk show* would take many forms over the course of the decade, eventually assuming an amalgamated format that perhaps can be best described as *variety*. Some of these programs, like Marcelo Tinelli's *Videomatch,* would eventually attract massive viewership. However, this latter phenomenon was perhaps too new to appear on *Cha cha cha's* radar, and skeptical *televidentes* would have to wait until the end of the decade before they would enjoy watching Momus, in the dual form of Diego Capusotto and Fabio Alberti, taking proper potshots at the enormously watched talk / variety show.[170]

Nevertheless, the talk show in its prototypical state had definitely taken off by *Cha cha cha's* opening season. In fact, regarding this year (1993), Ulanovsky, Itkin y Sirven write that "la presentación en sociedad de flamantes talk shows es una de las características de la temporada" (544). These programs, filmed in front of a live audience and often providing commentary from selected *experts* and *everyday Janes and Joes,* as well as from audience members, constitute the prototypical form of the talk show, and their format would survive intact alongside new developments such as those brought about by Tinelli. Thus, for example, a glance at a 1998 episode of Lía Salgado's

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[170] Their program, called *Todo x $2*, would be emitted on public Canal 7 from 2000-2002.

Hablemos claro (1993-1998) will help to describe exactly how talk show achieved its translation of telenovela content to a bargain-basement format.

This episode, titled "El abuelo se fue con una pendeja," begins with an opening sequence showing people walking on a crowded city street, invoking the image of the *ser popular* so satirically portrayed by Casero's Conchola. Next, we see Salgado, who has herself the look of a telenovela star,[171] presenting the topic of the day. This introduction begins with a flimsy attempt at establishment of timeliness, as she mentions the recent re-incarceration of Jorge Rafael Videla, this time for having perpetrated the kidnapping of children whose parents had been imprisoned and / or killed during the last dictatorship. The legal action against Videla, Salgado says, is to large extent a result of the demands of these children's grandparents. Thus, she begins to argue, Videla's arrest has occurred "justamente en relación al tema que vamos a tratar hoy." However, directly afterward, she awkwardly retracts this statement—"no, pero, no con lo que tenga que ver con *este* tema, puntualmente…" then stumbling a bit more before arriving at the admission that in reality, the only connection between Videla's arrest and today's show is that they both have something to do with grandparents and grandchildren.

Having confirmed Alberto Ure's observation regarding the absence of even ill-paid scriptwriters on such programs, Salgado proceeds to show precisely why their presence was unnecessary. This she does, simply enough, by finally presenting the episode's actual theme, which of course has already been announced by its provocative title; to wit, dirty old grandpas who have taken up with paramours young enough to be

[171] Her heavily botoxed lips cannot help but remind us of Conchola's duck face.

their grandchildren, and who have moreover agreed to show up for a televised berating delivered by these same second-generation descendants. Without further ado, the episode transitions to just such a quaint scene, as a young woman of 23 launches into an unrestrained verbal attack on her grandpappy, calling him a "degenerado" and accusing him of having lost all respect for his family. When he argues back that though she has her own family, including children, he never sticks his nose into her business as she is doing with his, she replies, "sí, pero yo voy a tener una familia *normal,* no lo que es esto." Here we have, encapsulated, the secret of the talk show, which like telenovela contains all manner of titillating content, all the while demagogically reproducing standards of bourgeois *normality* by hypocritically condemning the same behaviors whose exposure allows for the attraction of such massive audiences.

Accordingly, "Mañanas al pedo,"[172] *Cha cha cha's* take on the talk show, emphasizes the genre's often slipshod construction, inconsequential sensationalism, and above all its support of rigid, repetitive *habitus* and repertoire. The most common format consists of simple conversation between Alberti and Capusotto, both in drag, with the former playing the hostess and the latter always presented as an expert on some facet of child development such as "adolescencia" or "sexualidad infantil." These exchanges, small masterpieces of satirically harebrained affectation, begin with Alberti pompously drawing out the title of his guest, "la li-cen-cia-da Luz Clarita," as Capusotto's crosseyed character is scornfully denominated. The hostess then proceeds to set forth the issue of

[172] This title could loosely be translated as "Fucking around in the morning." Underlining their condition of being "*al* pedo" the "señoras" (played by Alberti and Capusotto) who present the fake program also appear "*en* pedo," or drunk, drinking whiskey despite the supposedly early hour (which ranges from 4:20 to 6:45 am).

the day, always either covertly or overtly sexual in nature, ranging from "el niño chupetero" or "el niño pispeador"[173] to questions such as "¿cómo viven los niños su primera experiencia sexual?" or "¿cómo le explicamos al niño su órgano sexual?"

The tone here is markedly didactic, with the hostess often saying, as if wanting to confirm through repetition the validity of her statement, that these themes are of utmost concern to all the "aaabuuus" and "maaamuuus"[174] who watch the program. Capusotto's "Luz Clarita" then begins to expound along the same lines, driving home the status quo message while at the same time making unexpected use of vulgarisms to reveal the sordid propaganda behind this message's supposedly enlightened content. For example, after saying in predictably "educated" fashion that the correct way to talk to a child about his sexual member is to "siempre llamar por su nombre a lo que el niño pregunta o se refiere," the names she chooses to demonstrate this practice in fact correspond more closely to other social realms ("Mañanas el pedo—Especialista en sexualidad infantil"). Thus, she asserts, the sex organ may be called "pito, pitulín, pipitote, trozo, pedazo, goma, banana," etc. The insertion of dialogism into this typical, educated monologue serves to point out the in fact quite arbitrary nature of this sort of discourse which tends to rest upon the laurels of *science* as expression of ultimate truth. Why should the only acceptable names be those sanctioned by the ivory tower?

[173] That is, respectively, the child who cannot quit his pacifier (*chupete*)—which gives rise to all manner of double entendre regarding the *pete,* lunfardo for fellatio—and the child who spies uncontrollably, with the extreme case of "el niño que quiso espiar a sí mismo a través del aujurito de su u-i-to," as Luz Clarita so elliptically describes it."

[174] That is, the *abuelas* and *mamás*. By drawing out their syllables in such a manner, Alberti emphasizes the condescending nature of these diminutives.

Ultimately, of course, the purpose of definition is to control, and "Mañanas al pedo" insinuates that the talk show aims precisely at controlling the body through use of normalizing humiliation. Luz Clarita's solution for aberrant expressions of physicality often comes down to the use of "cánticos," or little ditties, which as she says are particularly effective for captivating the childish imagination and for "cortando definitivamente y abruptamente con" the offensive behavior. Again, in the case of the "cánticos," we may note the intrusion of vulgarity into an otherwise *polite* discourse. Here, this maneuver serves the purpose of pointing out the brutally manipulative nature of these little songs as well as of the program in general. Thus, for example, to the "niño chupetero" ("Mañanas al pedo—el niño chupetero"), Luz Clarita suggests we sing "seguí con el pete y después te darán por rosquete,"[175] and to the "niño pispiador," "pispiar es una tarea muy funesta; dejá de pispiar, o si no pispiame ésta"—here gesturing toward her crotch ("Mañanas al pedo—el niño pispiador").

Following in the long tradition of Argentinian sketch, "Mañanas al pedo" provides space to breathe—and perhaps to eliminate other gasses as well—between the body and the discourses that attempt to define and control it. The talk show represents a new kind of foe in this sense, a Foucaultian extension of this discourse into previously untraversed realms. While the subject matters treated by Lia Salgado and her peers were simply banned from the TV of previous decades, their appearance in the talk shows of the 1990s did not exactly translate into liberation. Rather, it provided yet another, in some ways more pervasive, system of control, as a great variety of *deviant* behavior could now

[175] A loose translation: "Keep sucking your thumb, and they'll ream out your bum."

be exposed to public opprobrium. Even grandparents, as we have seen, were not exempt from this sort of condescending treatment. Thus, perhaps the most perceptive of "Mañanas al pedo's" many insightful hilarities is its focus on "children," and especially Luz Clarita's frequent widening of this category to include "niños" of up to 40 or 50 years of age.[176] The apparent "familial intimacy" of the talk show only existed on condition that the genre's practitioners should assume the role of parental figures to an infantilized viewing public. Making this aspect of the gab show obvious was one of the various ways by which *Cha cha cha* brought the practice of Argentinian sketch up to date at the end of the 20th century.

SI TIRAMOS DE UN HILO…

While the Parakultural actors gave ample attention to the television formats (sitcom, telenovela, and talk show) that benefitted most from the 1990s' atmosphere of savage capitalism, *Cha cha cha* was by no means only a three-ring circus. In fact, the program parodies such an array of televisual formats that it would be impossible to mention them all here. That said, it behooves my discussion of *Cha cha cha* as global critique of televisual production to mention briefly some of the other genres and televisual phenomena it spoofs.

[176] E.g.: "A los diecisiete, dieciocho años el niño empieza a tocarse. Y esto se extiende hasta aproximadamente los cincuenta. Entre los cuarenta y los cincuenta el niño se pone toqueteador insoportable."

Many ostensibly non-political televisual formats, as we have seen, may lend themselves to the general purpose of reproducing entrenched *habitus* and repertoire. However, Argentinian politics also has a history of taking the direct approach, producing screenic texts that lay down the law in no uncertain terms. Certainly, the most obvious examples of this would have occurred during the years of the most recent military dictatorship.[177] However, in keeping with *Cha cha cha's* tendency to interest itself with the devilish subtleties of oppression rather than with its most blunt expressions, the program—with a few exceptions—avoids dictatorship-era reference, sticking more closely to the present and to the distant past.

Thus, in terms of riffs on direct propaganda, Canal 2's program gives us its parodies of the Perón-era newsreels, *Sucesos argentinos,* as well as the mad rants of the fictional "Gilberto Manhattan Ruiz, Ministro de Ahorro Postal," in fairly direct allusion to the *cadenas nacionales*[178] of the 1990s in which Minister of the Economy Domingo Cavallo defended the *convertibilidad* and austerity plans that kept international investment flowing in throughout the 1990s to the benefit of the country's upper classes.

Sucesos argentinos, Argentina's first series of cinematic newsreels with sound, was founded by newspaperman Ángel Díaz in 1938 (Kriger 6). This business, like most of the rest of the communications industry, came to be heavily subsidized and in turn largely controlled by the government during Perón's first presidency (1946-1955). More

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[177] For a detailed history of government and governmentally-aligned propaganda during this period and just prior to it, see Sebastián Carassai's *Los años setenta de la gente común. La naturalización de la violencia* (2013).

[178] *Cadena nacional* refers to a speech delivered by a political figure over various channels (generally at least all free-to-air TV channels) as well as radio stations. Technically for use only in cases of national emergency, the *cadena nacional* has in practice been utilized—often controversially—on many other occasions, often for consolidating public support for specific political agendas.

specifically, *Sucesos argentinos* fell under the sway of a man named Raúl Apold.[179] Apold's official title was Secretary of Information but might have been better described as Chief Propagandist. Besides blacklisting various prominent actors and other artists who opposed the regime, as well as changing the official time when Evita "entró en la inmortalidad" from the actual 8:23 pm to a supposedly more *memorable* 8:25, Apold also invented the famous motto "Perón cumple, Evita dignifica" (Baschetti 2).

The deadpan voice-overs (done by Casero) in *Cha cha cha*'s mockeries of these historic newsreels always end by reverentially citing this maxim. Humor arises, meanwhile, from the contradiction between these monologues singing the regime's achievements, and the visually depicted *sucesos* themselves. In one of these sketches, for example ("Sucesos argentinos—elecciones") while the narrator describes an election day as having been "apacible y acorde con la vocación democrática de nuestro pueblo," we see a man with Trotskyist facial hair (Rodolfo Samsó) making gestures of protest and then being hauled off by the cops. In another ("Sucesos argentinos 2") the narrator describes a gymnast (Mex Urtizberea), shown performing an iron cross, as "un hombre argentino de una singular envergadura deportiva," but then the camera pans down so we can see he has been standing on the shoulders of a fellow athlete (Pablo Cedrón).

Displaying a certain simple yet innovatively screenic approach to the age-old sketchy practice of calling attention to the gap between the official story and lived reality, the "Sucesos argentinos" pieces take aim at the historical roots of an institution still very

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[179] "Apold debía ver y autorizar los noticieros previamente a la exhibición en las salas. Además su oficina estatal proponía las notas que Díaz debía realizar, fundamentalmente centradas en las obras del gobierno" (Kriger 8).

much at the center of Argentinian politics. Though like Brown (264) one may plausibly argue that, with his dismantlement of state industry, "Menem accomplished more de-Peronization in two years than the military had in twenty years," still this 1990s demagogue shared more with Perón than just his political party. Though their ends might have differed,[180] their means were remarkably similar. Like Perón, Menem held sway over the nation by appealing more to popular sentiment than to logical argument. While Perón had made use of imagery previously spread by popular media regarding the virtues of the working class, Menem utilized mass media to appeal to popular hopes, still unfulfilled after six years and counting, that Argentina's return to democracy would magically transform the country once again into "un país normal."

Appropriately, then, *Cha cha cha* also includes a series of pieces, reminiscent of the *monologue sketches* of radio days, in which Alberto Casero plays the character "Gilberto Manhattan Ruiz, Ministro de Ahorro Postal." While these sketches would probably contain a certain entertainment value even for those unversed in politics of the 1990s, they certainly aim themselves most directly at viewers who had seen—as had a significant percent of Argentinian viewership in those days—Minister of the Economy Domingo Cavallo's *cadenas nacionales*. Though in reality Casero bears little resemblance to this functionary, a distorting camera lens turns him into a living cartoon in caricature of Cavallo, accentuating the comedian's forehead to absurd dimensions and allowing him to give the impression of the evangelistic neoliberal's glittering gaze and Draculesque eyebrows. Casero achieves similar effects with the tone and content of his

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[180] Even on this note, though, it must be remembered that during his second term Perón reversed many of his earlier policies, unleashing a wave of privatizations and cracking down on unions.

monologues, as he apes Cavallo's imperative delivery style, as well as his frequent proclamations of the need for austerity and other measures in line with the Washington Consensus.[181]

It is important to note that while these sketches are as close as this program gets to making explicit reference to contemporaneous sociopolitical phenomena, still the central character remains technically fictional. Likely, *Cha cha cha's* indirect style has much to do with its creators' practical awareness of the current media environment defined by Debray as "l'univers indiciaire." As Alberto Olmedo may have discovered early on with his "Yeneral González" sketches, overt caricature, such as that frequently employed on Tinelli's *Videomatch,* would run the risk of emphasizing the sympathetically *human* nature of the functionary in question. The Parakultural performers' approach to Cavallo, on the other hand, allows them to focus on this man's *alienness*. The absurdly distorted image accomplishes this goal in one way—in another, the choice of the name Gilberto *Manhattan* Ruiz, alluding to the Harvard-educated Cavallo's ties to the US political and economic systems, and specifically to the New York Stock Exchange.

Finally, the fictional quality of "Gilberto Manhattan Ruiz" also allows these sketches to go deeper than mere contemporaneous reference, digging down to the historical roots of the current politico-economic situation. Tellingly, the substitution of

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[181] In one of these pieces Ruiz announces "Hemos vendido a un consorcio la provisión nacional de aire respirable" (*Cha cha cha* 1:9). In another, he announces the imminent "venta de Patagonia" so that companies will have a place to dump all their industrial waste without anyone knowing where it is (*Cha cha cha* 2:2). On various occasions (e.g. "Manhattan Ruiz: el cachetazo económico") he threatens to "pegarle un cachetazo económico al país."

Cavallo's title, Ministro de la Economía, with "Ministro de Ahorro Postal," takes us back to the first decades of the 20th century, when Argentina was "un país normal"—that is, *normal* according to the standards of wealthy European countries. During this time (1915) Victorino de la Plaza's government created a financial entity known as la "Caja Nacional de Ahorro Postal," meant to encourage the habit of saving amongst Argentinian citizens, especially children (Pasquali 1). Children could deposit their money in exchange for stamps kept in a little booklet, supposedly redeemable later for a sum reflecting the current interest rate. In many cases, however, the deposit was never recovered, much less any interest ("Casilda: Cobraban sesenta pesos" 1), perhaps because the rate of inflation turned the initial sum into an infinitesimal quantity.

The effective association of Cavallo with the long-defunct "Caja Nacional de Ahorro Postal" belittles the current Minister of the Economy and also allows *Cha cha cha* to emphasize the condescending tone often used by this functionary in his addresses. These sketches' opening sequence replaces the majestic national flag and solemn introduction of the *cadenas nacionales* with a shot of a child's *libretto de estampillas*[182] accompanied by Casero's bad vocal imitation of trumpet music and mockingly ceremonious voice-over introduction of himself as the Minister of Postal Savings.

The format of Cavallo's addresses seems to have generally consisted of an introduction in which he announced the regime's recent successes, followed by the description of new austerity measures, and finally some specific words of advice,

[182] A subtly brilliant expression of both the artificial nature of the current economic situation, as well as of the global hegemony to which this situation responds: this old stamp booklet in the opening sequence is marked in the middle with a Mickey Mouse stamp.

obviously intended to instill the habits of “fiscal discipline” in Argentinian citizens. The Minister from Córdoba stumbles from time to time over his words,[183] his economic discourse is complicated, and often it seems he is trying to compensate for these deficiencies with a forceful tone occasionally verging on shouting. Casero apes these qualities through constant digression into petty detail and incoherence—e.g. “La única manera que puedo reactivar una empresa es el…coso…” (*Cha cha cha* 2:2)—by yelling and glaring at the camera as well as constantly threatening to “calentarse,” or become angry. Like “Mañanas al pedo,” then, the “Manhattan Ruiz” sketches suggest that television sometimes infantilizes its viewership, in this case with a would-be father figure who uses intimidation to make up for a lack of substantive discourse.

However, the Parakultural artists’ satirical take on state-run media does not stop with methods of direct address such as *Sucesos argentinos* and the *cadenas nacionales,* but also takes into account other programming offered on the country’s nominally public television. For example, *Cha cha cha’s* “La hora Juanca,” supposedly an educational program for children, points out the perennial mix of budget issues and propagandism suffered by public Canal 7.

Though typically Canal 7 has had to raise a significant part of its own revenue through advertising, at the same time it has been tossed about mercilessly by the winds of regime change, often undergoing dramatic transformations of personnel. As we have seen, such shifts began as early as 1955, when the takeover perpetrated by the so-called

[183] One clip of considerable YouTube fame, entitled “Domingo Cavallo dice la verdad a los argentinos,” exposes what sounds like a Freudian slip in which the Minister, assuring the future stability of the peso, begins to refer to this currency as a “mentira,” stopping short after the first syllable of the word and correcting himself: “moneda.”

Revolución Argentina partially occasioned the beginning of Alberto Olmedo's small-screen career. In the 1990s the beat went on, and Adriana Schettini (55) frankly describes the public TV of those years as "el canal de los amigos del presidente." Meanwhile, as Ulanovsky, Itkin, and Sirvén (615) report, the country's annual public television budget was but a tiny fraction of that of *other* "países normales": 2.5% of that of Spain's RTVE and 1.5% of Italy's RAI, with nearly a quarter of this sum coming from advertising revenue. It's no wonder, then, that as usual in the 1990s Canal 7 was holding down last place in the free-to-air ratings.

"La hora Juanca" parodies Canal 7's attempts at *public service* programming, with Casero as "El Ratón Juan Carlos," a pathetic, drunken, brazenly partisan man in a rat suit, who is frequently booed by the children in the live audience as well as by his own crew. Sharing talk shows' lack of scriptwriter, the program relies solely upon "Juanca's" halfhearted, off-the-cuff attempts at teaching children the alphabet, which often demonstrate his own ignorance[184] or drift off into inappropriate obscenity.[185] Occasionally other forms of diversion are offered as well, as in one episode when Juanca presents with great ceremony an abandoned, broken-down motor scooter that the police removed from downtown Buenos Aires two years ago. Since no one has shown up to claim it, the program is going to give it away to one lucky child who will thus "cumplir un sueño" (*Cha cha cha* 4:10).

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[184] On one occasion, for example (*Cha cha cha* 4:5) he says that "g" *always* sounds like English "h," but then immediately contradicts himself, saying that "la 'g' es de gato," and then adds that 'g' is for "gómito"—i.e., a mispronunciation of *vómito,* or vomit.
[185] To demonstrate the pronunciation of "f," for example (*Cha cha cha* 4:6) he says "Federico fifa a Fifí" (Federico fucks Fifí).

At the same time, despite the government's obvious neglect, "La hora Juanca" makes no qualms about bedding down with representatives of state power. In fact, in one episode (*Cha cha cha* 3:4) the rotund rodent literally *tucks in* a dignitary referred to as "el Coronel" (Alberdi), singing a beddy-bye song to this pacifier-sucking man-child who responds with grotesque grunts and squeals of delight. And as it turns out, the large-eared host himself is cultivating a budding political career, campaigning for congressman on his own show with the shamelessly hypocritical motto, "contra la corrupción" ("El ratón Juan Carlos se postula para la provincia de BsAs").

Given the obvious historical and theatrical wherewithal of Casero's troupe, it is not entirely far-fetched to think that there could be some reference here, conscious or no, to "los tres ratas" of *La Gran Vía* (1886), the traveling Spanish *revista* that first brought this format to Buenos Aires' *género chico*. In any case, lunfardo certainly conserves the meaning of *rata*—thief—employed by that early popular theatrical success. Thus, "el ratón Juan Carlos" serves as a symbol of what many might have described as the double larceny associated with Canal 7: governmental neglect of the *public service* mission, coupled with rampant propagandism.

However, *Cha cha cha's* televisual critique certainly does not limit itself to state influence. In fact, in response to this new era in which the (screenic) image was everything, the majority of the program's gibes aim themselves at the incrementally expanding predominance of the televisual simulacrum in general, and at the corporate forces behind this prevalence. A certain temporal awareness informs much of this commentary upon the arrhythmias associated with the ever-accelerating proliferation of

the image in particular and in general with capitalism's "time is money" attitude, which so often results in a preference for quantity over quality. In one rare episode transmitted before a live audience, Casero confides that a producer once told him "que tenía que hacer chistes donde la gente se riera cada 16 segundos, como los norteamericanos" (*Cha cha cha* 2:9).[186] Meanwhile, regarding the televisual phenomenon known as "zapping" which so obsessed media theoreticians of the 1990s like Beatriz Sarlo, *Cha cha cha* fights fire with fire, including sections composed entirely of fleeting, disparate images separated by ephemeral intervals of white noise.[187]

Of course, there was a direct correlation between the fast-paced succession of images and the growing number of channels available to an average viewer. In the 1990s this phenomenon responded in large part to the rapid growth of the cable industry, and *Cha cha cha* thus devotes significant time to lampooning pay TV. In his book, *Éloge du grand publique* (1990), Dominique Wolton sets forth the interesting argument that despite the shortcomings of the old free-to-air channels, at least they served a community-building purpose by giving the public a common theme of discussion (75).[188] Cable, by contrast, tends to splinter audiences, removing their common ground by appealing to a diverse array of interests.

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[186] It is not entirely irrelevant to note that this episode had to compete against one of the national team's soccer matches, and Casero notes good-humoredly but also with evident chagrin that this situation will result in the program's having an even lower rating than usual.

[187] Mirroring the medium, these interludes become increasingly more frenetic as the program advances from season to season.

[188] In the chapter titled "Television, identité et nationalism" (266-316) Wolton also defends a certain degree of nationalism, and TV's portrayal of such, as essential to the maintenance of effective international communication. Perhaps each country has certain forms of televised cultural production which, like Argentinian sketch, combine expression of national characteristics with constructive criticism of the same.

Casero's troupe seems to have shared Wolton's point of view, and they drive it home by inventing an astonishing array of special-interest programming. A guest on one episode of "Mañanas al pedo," for example, is the "lorólogo," Profesor Pádula (Capusotto), who tells us that in addition to studying these fascinating avians, he has his own program, *Lorovisión,* on cable channel "setenta y nueve mil catorce" ("Mañanas al pedo—el lorólogo"). Also, *Cha cha cha* includes occasional "Orientaciones al abonado" imitating the on-screen listings of available programming for cable subscribers, in which they permit their imaginations to run perhaps even wilder than usual, coming up with program titles such as *Xuxa contra el Petiso Orejudo*[189] (*Cha cha cha* 4:6) and *Carlos fue de cuerpo y no volvió* (*Cha cha cha* 4:3), both on "Canal XXX," *Los ositos electrocutaditos* on "Todopelis" and *Artesanías con bosta* on "Canal del Campo" (*Cha cha cha* 4:14), as well as, of course, *Cualquiera llega al cable,* on "Channel Cable" (*Cha cha cha* 4:11).

Finally, my necessarily superficial scratching[190] of *Cha cha cha's* parodic surface cannot omit mention the set of monologue sketches titled "Todos juntos en capilla." Modeled upon the late-night religious programming with which some television channels closed out their daily transmissions, "Todos juntos" stars Fabio Alberti as a bumbling priest who attempts to set viewers off down a straight and narrow path by spreading the teachings of the fictitious *martyr,* Peperino Pómoro.[191] As noted in Chapter 2, one of the first recorded instances of humor on electronic media, Florencio Parravicini's radio piece

[189] A Buenos Aires serial killer from the first half of the 20th century whose distinctive physique and ultra-violent behavior even today continue to traumatize and captivate the popular imaginary.
[190] Thus it seems to myself, as a fan, which I also am in addition to having academic pretensions.
[191] How to translate this doubly priapic moniker? Cocky Dickens? Dicky Johnson? Peter Wang?

“El descubrimiento de América” (1924), contained marked instances of blasphemy. However, the virtual absence of this comic element from the next 70 years of mass-communications history speaks to the tightly-managed nature of these media so often thought of as tools for controlling a potentially unruly body politic.

However, the intensity of such controls has a way of eventually backfiring, and the explosive effects of “Todos juntos” could be explained in just such a manner. Veritably, in one episode Alberti proposes to air the “incorporación dentro nuestro mismo”[192] of the famous martyr, and achieves this fundamental expression through a trinity of flatulent outbreaks during which he appears caught up in a state of rapture and his body is enveloped in a golden aura. More often though, the bodily functions pertain to the hallowed Peperino himself, as through supposedly unintentional innuendo Alberti’s descriptions give us to understand that the holy man was in fact a promiscuous bisexual. Frequently these tales end, “y la (o lo) tocó, y lo (o la) frotó, y la (o lo) curó.” Thus, accompanied by his disciples Libé, Tomé, Lamí, Sobé, Subí, Bajé, Fui, and Andé, Peperino travels from hamlet to hamlet, even stopping in Gomorrah and Pedorrah (*Cha cha cha* 4:7). Besides curing the afflicted, he dedicates himself to spreading the good word, imparting such gems of wisdom as the following: “Es más fácil que la manzana sea red, a que la red sea manzana” (*Cha cha cha* 4:13); “Es más posible que el sauce sea llorón a que el llorón sea sauce” (*Cha cha cha* 4:3); and “Es más posible que el vinagre sea vino a que el vino sea vinagre” (*Cha cha cha* 4:11).

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[192] Besides the bawdy and the bodily, a good deal of the humor in these pieces comes from Alberti’s ingenious spoofs on the often stilted-sounding diction of biblical discourse. Integral to this approach is his abuse and misuse of the “vosotros” forms, as in “Remojad las lentejais antes de comedlas” (*Cha cha cha* 4:7).

Finally, the striking diversity of *Cha cha cha's* attack on televisual format could easily provide enough material in itself for an entire dissertation. We will have to content ourselves with the briefest mention of a few other examples, again here hardly exhausting the topic: "Sol de noche," a gossip / entertainment news program with star-crazed roving reporter (Mariana Briski) whose name, "Marcela Lacomme" indicated the lengths to which she goes for journalism; a sketch entitled "Chiste entendible" that sends up the often all-too-obvious gags of the sort favored by Pepe Biondi (*Cha cha cha* 2:5);[193] screenings of a series of public-service ads that shamelessly belabor their anti-drug admonition, after which the announcements' producer (Casero) arraigns the two directors (Alberdi and Capusotto) for not having made the message "direct" enough; more variations on the talk show—"Cuéntame tu caca" and "Juzguemos a los otros"; a parody, titled *Me quedé ciego*, of Sandro's movie *Siempre te amaré;* "Telescuela técnica," a faux voc-tech show poking fun at small-time cable programming, with presenters (Casero and Daniel Marín) spouting hyperurbanisms and staring dumbly into the cameras for what would be an unacceptable amount of time on more mainstream channels; various anachronistic music videos with Alberdi as an obviously drugged Elvis; and a series of televised want ads which as the series drew toward its end included the following self-referential notice: "Oferta: Se ofrecen dobles. Excelente curriculum. Larga trayectoria en programa pelotudo nocturno recientemente levantado por escaso rating" (*Cha cha cha* 4:11).

[193] In a jail, a man dressed as a jailer says to a prisoner "shhh, I'm a prisoner dressed as a policeman," and the other answers, "I'm a policeman dressed as a prisoner," drawing a gun and pointing it at the other man. Biondi had various sketches using a nearly identical mechanism.

With *Cha cha cha,* then, we find televised sketch coming full-circle back to its roots in the original *revues,* which focused their parodies on the images of reality fabricated by cultural production. As in the original *La revue des théâtres* (1728), this re-representational impulse is hardly apolitical; to the contrary, it lays bare the hegemonic discursive manipulation often surreptitiously embedded in works that present themselves as "simple entertainment," "pure art," "informational," "educational," and so on.[194] Just as the Saint-Laurent fairgrounds on the Parisian periphery provided some critical objective distance from which the foreign-born Romagnesis could provide satirical documentation of the goings-on in mainstream theatre and opera, Casero's troupe emerged from the *underground* to find a similar space on Eduardo Eurnekian's eccentric Canal 2.

The time was opportune for such a re-emerging criticality, now applied to the television and related media. The 1990s witnessed an explosion of the screenic image, which had become a hyper-massive system of communication capable of pushing forward exploitative politics in a way that perhaps even superseded the capacities of previous, more overtly authoritarian regimes. Thus, while programming *selling itself* as "public-service" in fact had much to do with the petty ambitions of "el Ratón Juan Carlos" and his numerous nonfictional avatars, the "crazy" Eurnekian and his bohemian protégés actually provided such a service by encouraging the public to take a critical, comical step back from the increasingly ubiquitous medium that had now installed itself not only in the living-room, but in other household spaces as well (and which would soon

[194] As we have seen, for example, the sitcom tends to mask its bourgeois complacency with a superficial *progressiveness*.

attach itself even more closely to its possessors' persons).[195] Since the power of this medium lay largely in its multifaceted programming, which encompassed a wide variety of genres and even historical periods, an effective satirical attack had to utilize a similarly diverse approach. As I have tried to show, *Cha cha cha* succeeded perhaps as well as any one program could have done in carrying out such a complicated mission. Indeed, keeping in mind Schettini's statement regarding the relationship between television and society in the 1990s, in parallel fashion one might say of *Cha cha cha* that "si tiramos de un hilo, lo que viene es la televisión entera."

The Insomniac's Nightmare: Other Sketchy Adaptations to the New Media Environment

Like the Romagnesis, the Parakultural artists shied away from a frontal attack on the *representatives* of power, focusing instead on the *representations* that drove home hegemonic discourses. However, the intervening years had witnessed a succession of sketchy inroads into direct criticism of public figures and policy. In Argentina, this movement came to a head in the succession of *revistas* that during the first half of the 20th century mixed sociopolitical commentary with bawdy, bodily reference, using physicality to help audiences create some space between the body and the disciplining discourses aimed at controlling it. With the arrival of often heavily-monitored mass media, the constituent parts of *revista's* heady mixture were separated out and

[195] Or to the persons of the possessed?

considerably diluted, resulting in programming devoted *either* to political commentary—often from a solidly middle-class point of view—*or* to fairly innocent physical humor.

By the 1990s these controls had for the most part been lifted, but as it turns out they were no longer necessary for the maintenance of hegemony. The "univers symbolique," so vulnerable to transgressive references to the ordinariness of political and social leaders, had given way to the "univers indiciaire," in which the quotidian nature of the *jet set*—encompassing both politicians and other *faranduleros*—now worked as often as not as a point in their favor. Now, instead of getting dressed up and going to the theater to see who politicians were sleeping with, one might receive this same information without having to exit the intimacy of one's own bedroom. Indeed, the *jet setters* themselves had become regular, virtual visitors in the living spaces of the masses.

This state of affairs tended to take the bite out of humor aimed at *belittling* or *humanizing* politicians and other leaders through imitation. Because of their daily treatment by news shows, talk shows, and so on, everyone already knew about the all-too-human side of the diminutive images on the television screen, and in many cases probably sympathized with their leaders' foibles: "If I could get away with it, I'd also drive my Ferrari at breakneck speed to Pinamar, or invite a string of eligible bachelorettes over to the presidential palace!"

Thus, sketches that would have struck some audiences as wildly transgressive just a little over a decade prior to this period now seemed like little more than good-natured needling of the public figures concerned. Even the more acerbic of such send-ups ran this risk, as demonstrated for example by some of Jorge Guinzburg's work. For his 1996

show *Tres tristes tigres,* for example, Guinzburg and his team created a one-hour special episode modeled on the recently released US film *Independence Day,* titled "Día de la dependencia."

To be sure, one finds here some undeniably brilliant satire. When Spock, for example, here played by Carlos Perciavalle,[196] describes himself as "insensible," Menem (Guinzburg) asks him if he wouldn't like to be the new Minister of the Economy. Also, anticipating Carassai's 2013 analysis of the early 1970s telenovela *Rolando Rivas, taxista* as authoritarian propaganda, "Día de la dependencia" revives Rivas (here played by Darío Volpato) as a spaceship pilot who declares "lo único que puede salvar el país ahora es una mano dura." And the ultimate dethroning moment arrives when Guinzburg's Menem gives a speech to rally the country against the invading aliens, asking the onlookers to choose "liberación o dependencia." When the crowd roars "liberación" the president looks confounded, then repeats the binary opposition, emphasizing hopefully the the second term, "*dependencia*." Having failed again to elicit the desired response, he finally restates the question: "¿Dependencia, o dependencia?" and the officials standing beside him gloss over the redundancy with a resounding applause which is then taken up by the crowd.

However, there is probably something a little too lovable about this spoofy Menem with his provincial accent and bumbling speeches,[197] who though surrounded by a Casa Rosada in ruins, still dreams with childish innocence about being re-elected in

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[196] Together with Antonio Gasalla, co-founder of the "café-concert" craze of the 1970s and 1980s.
[197] Guinzburg's Memem repeats word for word the *metida de pata* actually committed by the president when he attributed Antonio Machado's famous line, "Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar," to prominent Argentinian folk musician Atahualpa Yupanqui.

1999. Also, implicitly approving of what the episode purports to satirize, its cameras spend long moments focusing with obsessive detail on the bodies of seminude women who follow the president around. These weak points in Ginzburg's "Día de la dependencia" point to the difficulties of carrying out traditional political satire in the "univers indiciaire," where leaders are expected not so much to *symbolize* a set of ideals but simply to carry out the often onerous task of being human, just like everyone else—even though of course they're *not* just like everyone else. Bodily reference alone was no longer sufficient for sidestepping the discursive clout of dignitaries who had already fully incorporated the physical as part of their public personae.

Nowhere would this become more apparent than in the massively watched talk / variety show, Marcelo Tinelli's *Videomatch*, which included a sort of sketch *light* as part of its repertoire. Epitomizing the capitalist practice of mass production, *Videomatch* celebrated its thousandth showing in 1994, just four years after its initial episode, and a host of celebrities, including some politicians, made appearances here to assist with the festivities. From Sandro and Xuxa to Bernardo Neustadt and Gabriela Sabatini, to Menem himself, they all show up to participate in the ill-thought-out sketches, most of which resemble bloopers but without the saving grace of having occurred by accident.

Never one for subtleties, Tinelli places the segment with Menem at the very beginning of the episode. The *joke,* if it can be termed such, consists of putting a Menem imitator in front of the Quinta de Olivos, and while he holds forth with a hammed-up *acento riojano*, the real president comes and taps him on the shoulder (each tap accompanied by a blooperish sound effect). The two Menems then converse, discovering

the coincidences of their backgrounds—both root for the same soccer team, both were born in Anillaco, and so on. This kind of material, whose scanty comic value rests solely upon physical and speech-related resemblance, by comparison makes Guinzburg's "Día de la dependencia" look wildly transgressive. In the end it amounts to nothing more than a mutual bootlicking session, with Tinelli's reporter praising the president for being a good sport, and Menem raving about Tinelli's brand of "humor sano,"[198] which he says is just what the country needs to pull it through difficult times.

Despite the encroachment of foreign and foreign-inspired formats as well as of insipid mass-produced knockoffs like Tinelli's, sketch proper in the 1990s was not entirely confined to the bounds of *Cha cha cha*. Having emerged from the café-concert onto the television in the late 1980s, Antonio Gasalla continued to televise his campy *costumbrismo* throughout the following decade. Like Casero's troupe, Gasalla generally shied away from direct depiction of prominent politicians and entertainers. However, while the Parakultural artists based their humor on close observation of the media, especially television, Gasalla's sketches instead focused on society, particularly the middle classes, whom he depicted as neurotic and unfulfilled.

Particularly representative of his work are the "Marta y su madre" sketches, in which former *revista* star Norma Pons plays the single, middle-aged Marta, and Gasalla, her elderly mother. Evidently Marta has dedicated her life to taking care of her mother and thus has no family of her own, but all the same her parent torments her pitilessly, purposefully ruining her every small chance at happiness. In one sketch, when Marta

[198] As discussed in Chapter 2, this term was often used to describe Pepe Biondi, who worked during television's tightly-controlled early years.

wins a week-long trip to Miami, her mother plants weapons and a Cuban flag in her suitcase, and immigration, almost having imprisoned her, instead returns her directly to Buenos Aires ("Marta viaja a USA"). In another, her mother sells Marta's Olympic gold medal to buy an expensive ring for herself as a Mother's Day present ("El día de la madre"). In another, Marta brings a date home and her mother, who was supposed to spend the evening with Marta's aunt, instead brings the drunken aunt over to the apartment, ruining her daughter's tryst ("Marta tiene una cita con Mario"). Inevitably Marta ends up in tears while her mother does a bad job of concealing the thrill of having once again emerged victorious.

Their depictions of middle-class life put these sketches in direct opposition to sitcoms like *¡Grande, pa!*. First of all, Marta's modest apartment gives a much more accurate impression of middle-class socioeconomic reality than does the palatial abode inhabited by Arturo, his three daughters, and their provincial nanny-cum-benevolent-stepmother. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, these pieces stay true to the structure of sketch, refusing to administer the psychological happy-ending massage so often favored by sitcom. Despite their lack of direct political reference, their irresolution of interpersonal conflict lends these sketches an undeniable anti-establishment quality. Especially given the current sociopolitical and media climate within which the public was flooded with images of *opulent normality,* Gasalla, Pons, and their associates provided a rare, valuable reality check with their stubborn portrayals of fundamental middle-class discontent.

Born in 1941, however, Antonio Gasalla comes from an essentially pre-televisual generation. While his sketches have a certain timeless quality, they do not signal a televisual coming-of-age, as do those of *Cha cha cha,* nor do they comment so eloquently upon the ills and excesses particular to the 1990s, when *image was everything*. The same lack, however, cannot be attributed to the work of one of Gasalla's disciples (Ferreirós), the multitalented and many-faced Juana Molina. The daughter of tango singer Horacio Molina and actress / model Elva Villafañe, Molina grew up having plenty of opportunity to observe the world of showbiz and those attracted to it. Also, her family's Parisian exile during the years of the Dirty War gave her some objective distance from her native Buenos Aires. Drawn to music, upon her return to Argentina she nevertheless initially had difficulty making a living as a musician, but found employment on comedy shows—notably, Gasalla's—where she continued developing the caricatures she had first begun inventing during afternoons at play with her cousins and sister Inés (Ortelli).

Eventually these successful television appearances would lead to her own program, *Juana y sus hermanas,* shown on Canal 13 from 1991-1993. As its title indicates,[199] the show focuses on the deployment of Molina's various caricatures, many of them television-related. As such, it is more than possible that Molina's program served as inspiration for Casero and his troupe. But while the Parakultural artists embarked upon an epic, diachronic critique of television, Molina focused primarily upon the contemporaneous small screen and particularly on this medium's (re)production of

[199] The often-cited allusion to Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) goes beyond assonance and the relative importance of female characters in both works; in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen's character is a writer for a sketch comedy program.

feminine habitus and repertoire. Watching Molina's procession of female characters, one cannot help but recall Jean Baudrillard's comments regarding striptease (*L'échange symbolique et la mort* 109)—the female body defeminized, divorced from intellect, and transformed into a symbol of auto-sufficient, masturbatory phallic plenitude.

But Molina adds humor to her critique, parading forth a bevy of harebrained media *personalities* whose presence on the small screen obviously has to do only with their ability to project a certain highly artificial corporal image and their willingness to read—if badly—the lines given them by producers and directors. Thus, just to name a few, we have Ana María, a fur-coated roving reporter who maintains the falsity of rumors regarding the imminent collapse of an important bank, even as the cameras show this business' employees stuffing money into a suitcase and exiting the premises; Gabriela, a pilled-out studio reporter with four-inch fingernails and eyelashes to match, who has become so accustomed to reading the teleprompter that even her spontaneous speech retains the same monotone insensibility; and Gladys, a cosmetologist who uses so much liquid base that her face looks scorched, and who drives talk-show hosts and fellow guests crazy with the slowness of her speech and with her frightful hyperurbanisms.[200]

But Molina's masterpiece, perhaps, is the model and actress Marcela Balsam. One of Gladys' most important clients ("Juana y sus hermanas, no te lo pierdas!"), Marcela's last name reflects the fact that she, too, is little more than a lavish layering of *oleaginous elements*. Her face, a hilarious exaggeration of the liquid mask still favored even today by

[200] Instead of *crema*, she says *elemento oleaginoso*; instead of *dedo*, *elemento de la extremidad de la mano* ("Juana y sus hermanas, no te lo pierdas!"). *Vida* is *vivacidad,* and *daño* becomes *dañositud* ("Gladys el tegumento cutáneo y Febo")—all apparently symptomatic of overflowing self-pride at having been selected to appear on a television program.

women of the small screen and kindred souls, has lips exaggerated to thrice their real size with lipstick, and this in combination with copious eye shadow makes her look something like a cross between a raccoon and a circus clown. A platinum blond wig, slinky black dress, and knee-high black boots complete the costume.

Meanwhile her movements are those of an ungainly drag queen. Incapable of memorizing her lines, she is also disastrously clumsy and always ends up breaking plates and glasses, knocking over set walls, stepping on toes, kneeing crotches, etc., much to the consternation of her director (Horacio Roca), to whom she affectionately refers as either *gordo* or *bulú* (having said the word *boludo* so many times that it has naturally acquired this shortened form). However, she herself is never phased by these accidents, only responding with a characteristically lazy hand movement as if to hide her uncontrollable giggles—a gesture that of course instead calls attention to the fact that she is laughing. And ultimately she has no reason for concern, as apparently her *image* more than compensates for her incompetence and she is hired again and again, for commercials, telenovelas, murder mysteries, ballets, period pieces, etc. In fact, the omnipresence of Marcela Balsam might be taken as a metaphor for television itself in the 1990s.

In this sense, perhaps the defining Marcela Balsam sketch would be the one in which she appears in triplicate ("Juana y sus hermanas—muchos sketches parte 2"). The three *sisters* immediately begin talking about a good-looking man one of them met in the street, and the resulting excitement provokes a full-scale trashing of the set while the director (Roca again) yells desperately at his cameraman, "¡Cortá, Tito, cortá!" The scene then effectively cuts to a shot of the director lying down in an adjoining set, mumbling

“¡Cortá, Tito!” in his sleep. A member of the crew wakes him, and shortly thereafter Marcela appears at his side. Relieved, he says “Hola, linda, sos una sola, qué suerte,” but soon she is joined by her identical twins, all of them peering at him and asking “¿Qué te pasa, gordo? ¿Bulú?” and after emitting one final yelp of terror, he collapses, having either fainted or stroked out. The Marcelas then react with their characteristic giggle and hand gesture, as one of them asks the cameraman “¿Grabaste esto?”

Like Luciano’s dream in the *Cha cha cha* sketch discussed above, this eminently ironic, televisual apparition of the three Charites plants a hypothesis regarding art (here, television), dreams, and reality, implicitly stating that the three realms are not discrete. Thus, images and ideas may flow with relative ease from one to the next, just as the three Marcelas pass from one set designated for *fiction* and *fantasy* to another assigned to *reality*.[201] In the case of Molina’s pet subject of feminine comportment, a walk down a crowded city sidewalk, a review of growth trends in the cosmetics market or in rates of anorexia and bulimia, all seem to indicate that the director’s nightmare is anything but exclusively oneiric and televisual, and that in effect Marcela Balsam and her clones continue marching relentlessly into social reality.

Certainly, though her image is Legion, Marcela Balsam along with other of Molina’s creations does not target any particular media or political figure. Like *Cha cha cha,* then, but in a more thematically and historically specific way, *Juana y sus hermanas* brings the popularly rooted practice of sketch comedy up to date in the 1990s, sidestepping the stumbling blocks of the *univers indiciaire* by describing systemic

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[201] Importantly, audience attention is explicitly called to the fundamentally televisual nature of both of these settings.

qualities that dominate the powerful as well as the disenfranchised. Also like *Cha cha cha,* the meta-reflexivity of Molina's show indicates a televisual coming-of-age at a crucial time when for the most part the medium was behaving like an entitled adolescent on vacation in an exotic corner of her father's empire.

CONCLUSIONS: THE LAMED VAVNIKS OF THE GOOD SHIP ARGENTINA

The title of *Cha cha cha's* 1995 season, "Dancing en el Titanic," seems particularly attuned to the political and economic realities of the time. The economic crisis of 1994 had given Argentina ample notification that it was sailing into dangerous seas, yet like the doomed ocean liner it continued full steam ahead, failing to heed the warnings. 1995 saw the re-election of Carlos Menem, who like captain Edward Smith had an excess of faith in the unsinkability of his ship. Menem proceeded to continue steering the country out into the treacherous waters of international capitalism. J.P. Morgan, the Titanic's owner, also founded the securities firm that eventually "brought more Argentine bonds to market than any other" (Blustein 7) in the 1990s.[202] Just as its owner approved of the Titanic's reputation as "practically unsinkable," only a year before the country's 2001 sovereign debt default J.P. Morgan & Co. issued a report entitled "Argentina's debt dynamics: Much ado about not so much" (Blustein 7). And like the tycoon, who made a fortuitous last-minute decision to opt out of embarking on the Titanic's maiden voyage, J.P. Morgan & Co. did anything but go down with Argentina,

[202] As Blustein (6) notes, their dealings in these bonds "generated nearly $1 billion for big securities houses during the period 1991-2001."

only one of its many financial vessels, instead merging in 2001 with Chase Manhattan to become the U.S.'s third-largest financial institution. In both disasters, those who suffered most were the poor—the occupants of Titanic's *steerage,* who of course had nothing to do with steering the boat, and the *demos* in Argentina's so-called democracy.

However, despite the relative powerlessness of the underprivileged, a measure of plebeian consent was nonetheless necessary for the undertaking of both quixotic ventures, and in both cases this acceptance was achieved in part through the projection of wealth and stability. In the Argentina of the first half of the decade a small amount of trickle-down wealth mirrored the small comforts provided to the Titanic's third-class passengers, but these real, all too temporary benefits were nothing compared to the *images* of opulence circulated by pre-1912 publicity brochures for the White Star Line and by the media available to Argentinian viewers in the last decade of the 20th century. While this luxury was mainly reserved for first-class passengers on the ship, the images projected by Argentinian television were backed up by official rhetoric and popular myths regarding the country's imminent return to a Western standard of "normality," which would presumably improve considerably living conditions even for the republic's middle and lower classes. Chief culprits in terms of this sort of programming were foreign and foreign-inspired formats like the sitcom and the telenovela.

Meanwhile, by comparison with the heavily-restricted pre-1983 media, even programming that didn't focus so heavily on images of "normal opulence" tended to suggest an atmosphere of liberality and freedom—a superficial quality which, as we have seen in the case of the talk show as well as the sitcom, may have functioned as the

sheepish clothing beneath which demagogues and propagandists maintained or even advanced their habitual wolfish labors. At the same time, the sudden ubiquity of what had until recently been considered taboo thematics took the bite out of sketch's traditional approach to satirizing sociopolitical reality. Finally, any further need for mesmerization of the masses was achieved by a sheer, overwhelming *profusion* of screenic images. This occurred on both the micro level, on the flashy new talk / variety shows like Tinelli's and even on politically edgier versions of the same like Pergolini's, as well as on the macro level with the exponential explosion of—often foreign—cable programming. All this beguiling imagery can only have contributed to the docility of the shipboard public, which failed to mutiny until their vessel had already foundered.

Notwithstanding their acerbic satire, given the ebullience of *Cha cha cha's* sketches one could easily consider them as a sort of masterful dancing set to the music of their time.[203] To execute these edifying capers they had to know the *music* (i.e., televisual and to some extent cinematic performance), and its past, even better than the musicians, as well as have a preternatural sense of their own identity as cultural practitioners. As we have seen, the burlesque boogies of the Parakultural artists revealed not just the absurdities of contemporaneous television, but the whole diachronic process wherein this ludicrousness had become naturalized to the point where "Marcela Balsam," for example, could easily cross from the looking-glass into our own world and back again. From the quaint and awkward *Sucesos argentinos* to Domingo Cavallo's evangelical voodoo economics, from Argentina's modest domestic telenovelas of the 1960s to the genre-

[203] Besides the "Elvis" music videos I mentioned, *Cha cha cha* incorporates numerous other numbers involving actual dancing.

bending, multinational, fascist-fueled super-productions of the 1990s, and from early state-run TV's lonely, snowy black-and-white figures to modern cable's maniacal surfeit of flashing imagery, *Cha cha cha* reveals the history of screenic fantasy and its incursions into social reality.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by the program's opening sequence, the agility and audacity of *Cha cha cha's* small-screen striptease are achieved via the conscious honing of a centuries-old practice with special significance in the *porteño* cultural milieu. *Teatro de revista* and its associated sketches took to the Argentinian shores in the latter part of the nineteenth century, becoming a massively-watched comic format well before the advent of modern electronic media. Later, even as often draconian government control prevented the full-scale adaptation of traditional sketch content to these new media, still it survived in a way reminiscent of Diana Taylor's "embodied cultural practice" (3) as a format whose continuing popularity attested to Argentinian cultural particularity in the face of mass media's push toward globalization and homogenization.[204]

Cha cha cha's rescuing of this history, then, precisely at the moment when it looked like the battle had been lost and there was no longer any place for the "popular within the massive," as Jesús M. Barbero would say, has a certain air of redemption. Study of the matter, in fact, tends to lend a certain sacred aura to their often blasphemous-seeming gyrations. Like Mordecai, the Lamed-Vavnik described by Timothy Levitch in his portentous late-1990s film *The Cruise* (1998), the Parakultural comedians engaged with an epoch "preaching the carnivorousness and the religiosity 'Enjoy.'" And like

[204] Here, as discussed in my second and third chapters, I refer specifically to the continuing audience draw of sketchy shows during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when sitcom already ruled the US airwaves.

Mordecai, their response was to exaggerate these tenets, "jumping so high, and dancing with such an exuberance, that the others were embarrassed about them."[205] Just as Mordecai was therefore "banished from The Dance, dancing alone at night in the shed reserved for the sick and dying," Casero's troupe transmitted their audiovisual pirouettes from far-off La Plata, being watched only by the few strange folk who didn't prefer to instead tune in to the competing Wednesday-night soccer game or Hollywood movie (Lamazares).

This audience was obviously aware of something ignored by purportedly *enlightened* souls such as the Baal Shem Tov in Mordecai's time and Beatriz Sarlo in 1990s Argentina. As the Baal Shem Tov later said of Mordecai, according to Levitch, "That one was healthy among the sick and I did not see him." We continue awaiting a similar admission from the prominent Argentinian intellectual. Meanwhile, adding to its resemblance to some of Sarlo's beloved *vanguardistas, Cha cha cha* is aging well, acquiring a significant posthumous popularity. Hundreds of thousands of fans have watched its sketches on YouTube, a website (http://www.cha-cha-cha.com.ar) now documents its small-screen shimmies in meticulous detail, and the Vaporesianos[206] continue gathering in virtual and real space to celebrate the postmodern survival of a truly Argentinian cultural original.

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[205] Besides its low audience levels, another reason for *Cha cha cha's* cancellation was that a reactionary organization, miffed by the "Peperino Pómoro" sketches, sent a deluge of letters to the show's commercial sponsors. The group, ironically called La Fundación Argentina del Mañana, achieved its singularly *backward* goal when a significant number of these sponsors bent under the pressure, removing their advertising from the program.

[206] Named after *Cha cha cha's* third season, entitled "El estigma del Dr. Vaporeso."

Conclusion: "Humor Dissolves into the Air"…and Reconsolidates in Cyberspace?

My computer screen shows me an image, originally projected on television, of another computer screen, as a voice-over reads a burlesque advertisement for a "nueva red social" called "Garolfa" ("Peter Capusotto y sus videos—Chateros"). As the camera pans back to show the whole login page, reminiscent of its Facebook counterpart, the voice reads the new site's catchphrase, "La red social que te permite conectarte con todos y no estar con ninguno," then clarifies, "porque el ser humano puede ser alguien maravilloso para conocer, pero también es un enfermo para tenerlo a distancia." Like *Peter Capusotto's* other various sketches lampooning the internet, the "Garolfa" piece primarily emphasizes this medium's paradoxical capacity for reproducing both banality and atomization.

Part of the sketch shows a group of people participating in one of the fictional site's discussion threads. It immediately becomes obvious that instead of really communicating, they are mainly just using the thread to air their particular obsessions, all with the most slothful and repetitive of chatspeak. One participant, who rails against the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner,[207] exhibits the tendency of such opponents to manipulate the letter "K" to insult the Kirchners and denounce their control of other

[207] President of Argentina from 2007-2015, and wife of Néstor Kirchner, president from 2003-2007. Both were members of the Peronist *Partido Justicialista*.

politicians as well as of the media. “Ke KKS!”[208] he writes, and continues, “Y MaKri con Karrió[209] y Kágina 12 y Ka Kación y Kadio Kontinental.[210] KKS.”

Another commentator scolds the first one, writing “Acá no nos metemos con política, mi amor.” Then he immediately contradicts himself, insulting the other as a “Gorila apoyador de la opo.”[211] Amongst the other participants in the thread, we find a bubble-gum blonde who interjects with random, harebrained sentimentalisms, a pervert who lusts after her with cavemanish inarticulacy—“Chicahh. Chicahh Internet. Estasola? Estasola? Estasola?”—and another man whose only response to the general cacophony is to guffaw inanely in chatspeak—“Jajajaja, “jojojojo,” and so on.

Though concerning itself with a new medium, the “Garolfa” piece is really in many ways classic sketch. Like so many of its forebears, it highlights the machinery of repetitive *habitus* and repertoire that tends to preclude meaningful communication and social evolution. In fact, it emphasizes the tenacity of this repetitiveness by showing how it has a tendency to continue expressing itself through new technologies and new circumstances. However, “Garolfa” also shows how sketch itself, as a kind of repertoire focused on encouraging us to step outside of non-beneficial reflexive behaviors, can just as easily adapt to new technologies, including the internet. As it turns out, for several reasons the internet may turn out to be a propitious medium for the continued development of this cultural practice.

[208] I.e., what cacas!
[209] Here, revealing the extremity of his paranoia, he refers to politicians Mauricio Macri and Elisa Carrió, both vocal *opponents* of the Kirchners, as being under their sway as well.
[210] Continuing with his neurotic tirade, he lumps together the openly *kirchnerista* newspaper *Página/12* with the more reserved Radio Continental as well as the sometimes anti-K newspaper *La Nación*.
[211] “Gorila” has been used since the days of Perón’s second presidency (1952-1955) as a derogatory term for anti-Peronists. “Opo” is just a shortening of “oposición.”

The arrival of this new medium occurs, perhaps, at an opportune moment. As Hernán Ferreiros wrote in 2010, in an article titled "La risa se disuelve en el aire," for some time sketch comedy in Argentina has been having trouble making a go of it on television. Ferreiros (78) attributes this tribulation to a situation in which industry capitalists are afraid to invest in any sort of genre-specific, weekly program,[212] preferring instead daily "variety" programs. The latter sort of programming is cheaper as it avoids having to hire script-writers and usually gets by with paying daily performers little more than the average salaries of the old weekly stars. Furthermore, its nonspecific content is believed to have the best potential for attracting big audiences; the televisual equivalent of elevator music, it has the dubious distinction of being the least offensive to the greatest number of people.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the growing ubiquity of the "variety show" was already very apparent in the latter half of the 1990s. Meanwhile, the "variedades" along with foreign and foreign-inspired programming had pushed the once numerically as well as culturally centric sketch shows to the periphery. Ferreiros writes that this phenomenon only deepened during the next decade, as "más allá de *Peter Capusotto,*" since the turn of the century "no hay un programa de humor memorable en la televisión argentina y, en consecuencia, no hay nuevos actores cómicos." He then speculates that if there are any new comedians, "probablemente se estén formando en el teatro" (78), and not on TV.

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[212] An intelligent sketch show like *Peter Capusotto* requires ample time for planning and script-writing. Besides keeping confining himself to a weekly schedule, Capusotto also occasionally takes a year off to recharge his repertoire.

While the theatre no doubt does remain a fertile ground for comedians, I would like to suggest that the internet could be at least as important in this respect. Indeed, as it turns out, *Peter Capusotto* itself owes its success to this medium. Though originally airing on public Canal 7, it has many more viewers on the internet than on TV (Ortegui 7). The way that this program is presented by the internet suggests that sketch may have a certain structural affinity with this new medium; while entire programs have occasionally been uploaded, by far the most-watched clips of *Peter Capusotto* are individual sketches whose four- to six-minute lengths match the average duration of YouTube videos.

Besides its tendency to accommodate sketchy formatting, the internet has another quality that may eventually make it an ideal medium for the continuation of this sort of cultural production. Historically, sketch comedy has consisted of works that put more emphasis on (popular) cultural capital than on that of the economic variety, and the internet opens a venue for producers of just this sort. Argentinian comic Tetsuo Lumière has already created a significant body of work whose pointedly low-budget style underlines the possibilities offered to the short-form comedian by the internet.

Meanwhile, other artists make even Lumière's work look positively opulent. Consider, for example, Caracol Studio's YouTube clip, titled "Jimi Hendrix era negro, indio y peronista," which consists simply of a video of Hendrix playing the "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, except that the audio has been replaced by an acid rock version of "La marcha Peronista." Reminiscent of some of *Cha cha cha's* archival hijinks, this simple "actorless sketch" effectively emphasizes, and possibly brings about, the "estrangement from one's own culture and history" (140) that Paul Gilroy advocates

as a possible solution to the impasses of cultural and ethnic essentialism. Indeed, though as a rock star Hendrix epitomizes in a certain way *lo yanqui,* his anti-establishment élan also aligns him with a kind of anti-imperialism with which many Peronists would identify. At the same time, the clip hardly lulls Peronists themselves into complacency. The shot, over Hendrix's shoulder, of the roaring crowd at Woodstock will surely remind them of similar gatherings in Argentinian political history and of dangers inherent to the cult of personality.

Undoubtedly, then, there is much work to be done in the way of identifying how the venerable tradition of Argentinian sketch comedy continues to survive and thrive on the internet. It may be that the new medium will go—or has already gone—further than any other electronic medium has done toward returning this form of popular cultural production back to *el pueblo* from whence it came. Maybe—hopefully—future generations will see this dissertation as communicating merely a Raztembajerish focus on the heavy-handedly mediated comedy of an authoritarian age.

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